New Testament
Toaru Majutsu no Index 6

With preparations for the Ichihanaransai complete, the actual festival draws near. Bustling noises and the sounds of cheerful people fill Academy City.

And at the same time, a great incident has begun behind the scenes of the city.

The immortal girl Fraulein has wandered from Aleister's stronghold, the windowless building, and other monsters are gathering around her.

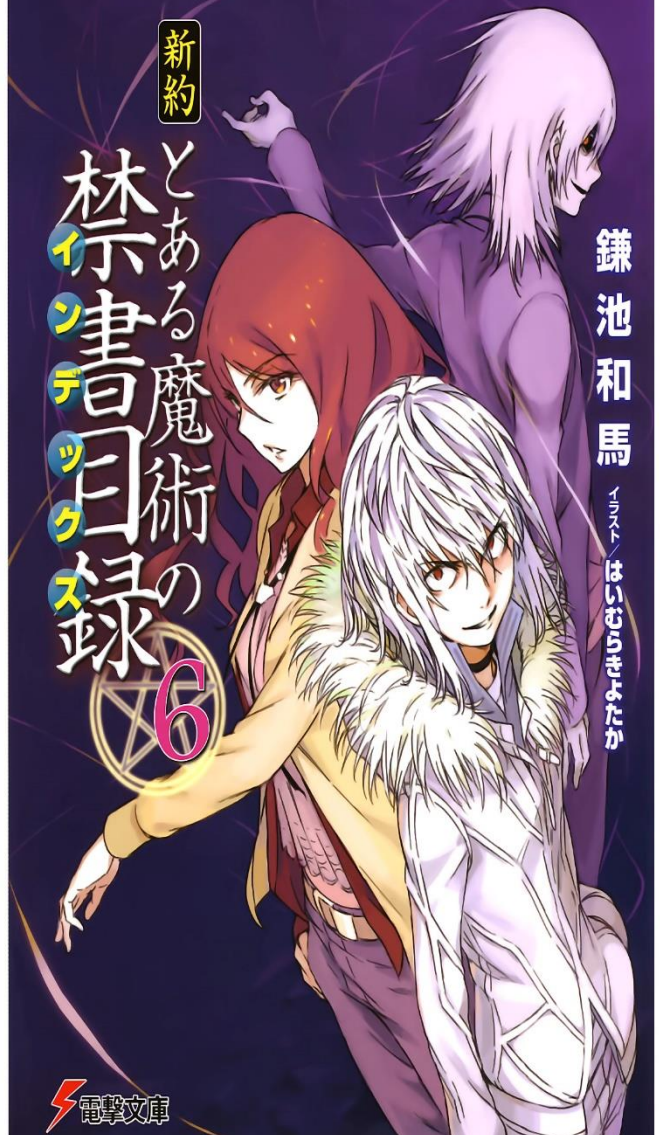
From Gremlin, an organization of magic and science, come the Dvergr Marian and the Lightning God Thor.

From the magic side come the Saints Brunhild and Silvia.

From Academy City come the Level 5 Accelerator, Mugino Shizuri, and Misaka Mikoto. Kakine Teitoku also arrives after surpassing the framework of humanity.

All of these "strongests" face off simultaneously and the storm created by these monsters envelops Academy City during the festivities of the Ichihanaransai.

Amid it all, the heavily injured and "weakest" Kamijou Touma races after Fraulein!



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Kamachi Kazuma

A railroad track! This item has a different meaning to it than a road. They look almost the same as they always have, but the materials used for the railroad ties have changed along with the era. I wonder if there is any way to let the cylindrical mailboxes live on?

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Toaru Majutsu no Index 1~22
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New Testament Toaru Majutsu no Index 1~6
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The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village 1 & 2
A Simple Survey
The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

カバー／暁印刷

新約
とある魔術の禁書目録
インデックス
6
鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか
"...It isn't her."
Immortal Existence released from the windowless building
Fraulein Kreutune
"What...was that...?"
Former Item member and plain old Level 0
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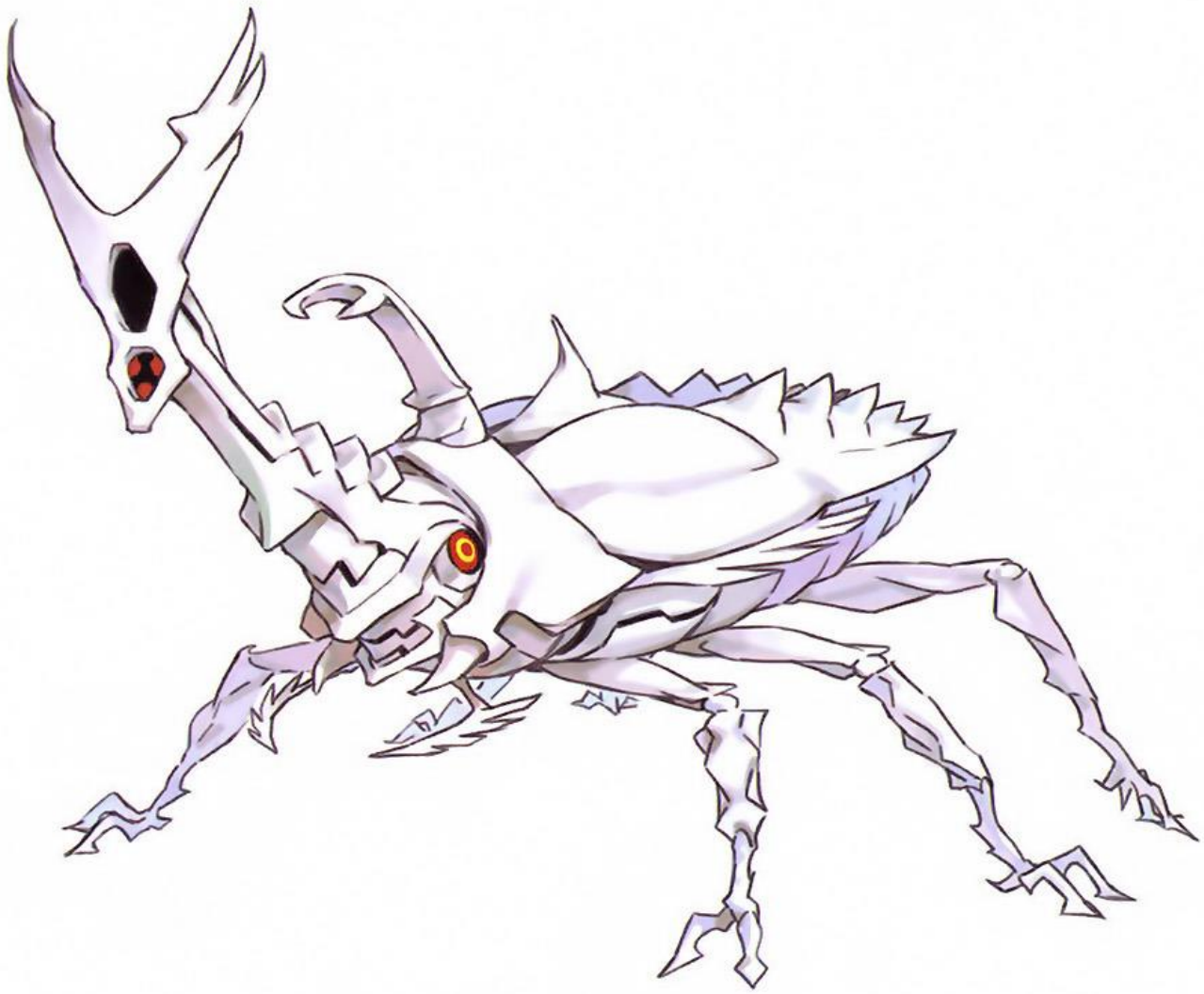


Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)

"...What do you mean?"
Magic Cabal boss working with Saints to target Fraulein
Leivinia Birdway
"Hey, Birdway. How about we fight and make up?"
Level 0 student of Academy City
Kamijou Touma

"Now, how far can my Dark Matter go in this world?"
#2 Level 5 resurrected with the power of Dark Matter
Kakine Teitoku
"Come on now, #1. If you want to die, then just get it over with."
#4 Level 5 with the Meltdowner ability
Mugino Shizuri
"...I will destroy them...I will end it all!!"
Academy City's strongest Level 5 who escaped from the darkness
Accelerator

???

Say there is a power that could defeat the demon king who ruled over evil.

The hero who possessed that power would likely be happy.

But not because he (or she) had been born with a special power.

It would be because he knows what his power is for and the world around him is widely aware of that fact.

Therefore, he would always know what path to take. No matter how powerful the demon king may be, he would never have to fear him. And even if he did take the wrong path and tried to live a different life, the majority of the people would act as guide rails and prevent him from living any other life. That may be restrictive, but it could also be seen as promising him a stable path to success.

On the other hand…

People with everything prepared for them in that way are quite a rarity. They have an ability and the conditions needed to allow it to bloom have already been prepared. But most of those with some kind of power are never told what it is for or how they should use it.

They have no objective.

They simply have the power.

What happens when an existence like that is let out into the world?

What happens when they have no guidance or direction and so they chaotically wield a power great enough to instantly kill the demon king?

In the end, that is where this story ends.

It is the story of a conflict that spreads widely and deeply around someone who does not know why they have the power they do.

The Night Before the Festival

The Ichihanaransai is a large-scale cultural festival held in Academy City. Kamijou Touma awoke as the city prepared for that festival.

“Ollerus and Fiamma of the Right brought me here from Baggage City…?”

Ollerus, the man who should have become a Magic God, spoke to Kamijou.

“Gremlin is a group that refuses to accept that the science side won the war. Under their reasoning, Imagine Breaker is simply in the way.”

As Kamijou prepared himself for a fierce battle, a figure snuck towards him. That boy said he was the Lightning God Thor, an official combat member of Gremlin.

“Both Gremlin led by Othinus and the group of monsters led by Ollerus are major threats. How about we save Fräulein Kreutune from them?”

Past records said the following.

“Fräulein Kreutune is a person of unknown identity who has survived 308 trials by ordeal without suffering so much as a scratch. But the justice system of the time ironically had no choice but to make the following judgment: She had not been injured because god had saved her. Therefore, Fräulein Kreutune was a mere human who had done nothing wrong.”

To perform maintenance on her artificial arm, Mugino Shizuri would periodically cook because that task involved many different motions and levels of strength.

She followed the instructions of a sweets-making kit in a cardboard box she did not recognize for that maintenance. But…

“Who are you?”

“Cendrillon. Thanks to having my body destroyed and returned to normal in the past, I can now disassemble my body and reconstruct it.”

Using remotely-controlled refrigerated trucks packed with explosives, the secret base of the dark side organization that the Freshmen belonged to,

and a backdoor left by Bersi aka Kihara Kagun, Kamijou and Thor attempted to break into the impregnable windowless building in which Fräulein Kreutune was imprisoned.

But…

“What…? That wasn’t us. The armor panels are being destroyed from within!?”

“…Is that…Fräulein Kreutune?”

After knocking out Kamijou and Thor with an unknown attack, Fräulein Kreutune disappeared into the Academy City night.

Meanwhile, Fremea Seivelun and Last Order who were both lost had a mysterious encounter with each other.

“You’re just a kid!!”

“What was that, you child!? says Misa—”

The disturbance caused by Fräulein Kreutune spread in the blink of an eye and both Gremlin and Ollerus’s group soon began moving.

Kamijou and Thor decided to…

“Let’s make them think this information is a trap. If they are both being cautious, they will think twice before taking action even if they learn of Fräulein Kreutune’s location. Meanwhile, we can charge in and secure her.”

Their plan used a decoy wanted poster created using Thor’s disguise magic and a school computer. They intentionally showed it to Marian Slingeneyer who was hiding within Academy City and they succeeded in making her needlessly cautious.

“Next is Ollerus’s group.”

“If Gremlin makes an odd move, they will quickly notice. If we pass some false information to the spy they send in to investigate…”

When Kamijou took action to carry out their disturbance tactic, he found Ollerus’s group’s scout. But he recognized her.

“Leivinia Birdway…!!”

“Move that toy out of the way. This is no longer a situation where you can beg for your life.”

And Kamijou was shot by Anti-Skill when they interfered. As Leivinia Birdway performed first aid on Kamijou, she swiped his student handbook.

“It appears Kamijou Touma has a connection with Marian Slingeneyer. Gremlin is in District 12. This is our chance to crush them.”

“…She fell for it.”

As Academy City’s dark side determined retrieving Fräulein Kreutune would be difficult, it was decided a certain strictly guarded Level 5 would be sent out.

“Kakine Teitoku-san, we Kiharas welcome science like you. Please just do it however you want. Go far enough to destroy the scenario imagined by us Kiharas.”

“…”

Fräulein Kreutune herself ran into two girls. Last Order and Fremea Seivelun. They spoke to her.

“Nyahh! Now we’re friends!!”

“We exchanged our contact information, so you can contact us whenever you want, says Misaka as Misaka puffs her chest out with pride.”

The magician named Cendrillon who snuck into Academy City using a special method was slightly smaller than before because Mugino used the wrong amounts, but she still began to take independent action to get her revenge against Gremlin.

“Finding the official members of Gremlin would be very difficult, but if I find Kamijou Touma and check around him…”

Mugino Shizuri discovered something odd on a road in the middle of the night. It was the girl she had once killed.

“Fren…da…!!”

“In the end, it doesn’t matter to me if you’ve come to terms with it!!”

Reading Thoth 78, a program directly created by the board chairman, said the following.

“To be blunt, in order for Fräulein Kreutune to instantaneously take in the massive amount of information needed to eclose, she must eat Last Order’s brain to gain control of the Misaka Network. She should gain that ability within 2 hours.”

And…

After being shot by Anti-Skill, Kamijou took action in order to resolve the problem.

To be specific, he escaped the hospital’s ICU.

“…I’ve gained some time. But not much. I need to secure Fräulein Kreutune soon…”

Various different goals were held.

Many different people took action based on those goals.

The preparations for the Ichihanaransai were complete and the actual festival finally began.

Also, a white nun yelled the following somewhere in the city.

“Touma! Who exactly is that girl clinging to your back!?”

Chapter 5: Surely Justice Can be Found Anywhere. *Black_to_Light.*

Part 1

It was half an hour after midnight.

Mugino Shizuri stood in front of an apartment complex in District 7 that was meant to hold multiple tenants in each apartment.

One of her eyelids writhed eerily. An unbelievable sight spread before her on the dark road.

It was a single girl.

She had long fluffy blonde hair, white skin, blue eyes, and a short, slender build. She wore the same beret as always, the same stockings as always, and the same miniskirt as always.

She was Frenda Seivelun.

Mugino Shizuri had sliced that girl's upper body from her lower body. She had once been a member of the dark side organization of Item along with Mugino. She had been in charge of causing explosions and producing firearms.

"Why do you look so shocked?"

The supposedly dead girl's lips moved.

A sigh temporarily interrupted the familiar voice.

"Surely you know just how many oddities this city holds. So don't you think it's possible that replacements for lost organs could be obtained? Or that some inhuman tech could allow the reuse of a body that's heart has already stopped beating?"

"…"

"In the end, that's what happened. I sold myself to Academy City. *So that I could survive.* It may be a bit of an extreme phrasing, but this body is only a rental. I have to perform work for Academy City in order to keep using it. That is all I know. I can only assume it works to someone's advantage for me to be standing before you now."

"…"

“Why did you decide to take for granted how I would feel about what happened? I assume you have good enough instincts to sense this is not the proper mood for an emotional reunion. In the end, that’s just how it is. This seems like a good time for the city to use me as a trump card. I don’t know who it will benefit, but I am perfectly fine with applying pressure to the #4.”

She was grinning.

And as she did, Frenda slowly approached Mugino. She was holding something in her hand. It resembled the correction tape used for stationery. It was actually a type of explosive that could be used to slice through a wall or door to enter a building.

Of course, no explanation was necessary for what would happen if it was attached to a human and detonated.

“*So what will you do? Will you try to kill me again?*”

Her questions were like stabs of a knife.

She took one step…two steps…three steps.

Anyone who knew of the #4 Level 5 Meltdowner power Mugino Shizuri had would know just how much of a risk it was to directly approach her. And yet Frenda showed no hesitation or fear as she did so.

It was as if she knew from the beginning she would not be attacked.

“You can’t, can you? In the end, this is exactly what it said in the data I read. You certainly have grown soft while I was being metallically regenerated. In the past, you would have killed me without hesitation. The mere fact that I managed to approach these three steps shows your hesitation and fear.”

They were now 50 cm apart.

Frenda brought her face in closer so that their noses were almost touching. A grin split across Frenda’s face.

“But you have no problem with this, do you? In the end, you want me to kill you. Hah hahh. You’re thinking that it’s my turn to kill you since you killed me, aren’t you? Not that letting me kill you will make up for your crime. But that doesn’t really matter. It doesn’t matter to me if your intentions are misguided.”

Frenda slowly spoke her next words.

She was almost whispering.

It looked as if she was about to bite into the center of Mugino’s face

“You just need to die.”

With those words, she pressed her correction-tape-like device against Mugino's stomach.

It was as if she was drawing a horizontal line of revenge.

She was trying to blow the upper body and the lower body apart.

But just before she could…

Without any change of expression, Mugino Shizuri unhesitatingly blew Frenda's right arm to pieces.

She had created a beam of light.

That overwhelming light shot out with tremendous force and blew away the darkness of the night.

Technically, it was made up of electrons.

Her power allowed her to maintain the pure form of electrons without allowing them to become particles or waves. She created a Particle-Function Waveform High Speed Cannon that used that inviolability to forcefully rip apart or roast her target.

It was known as Meltdowner.

When directly faced with the power classified as Academy City's #4, the correction-tape-like device and Frenda's right arm were turned to ash. Frenda let out a scream and was knocked away in something like a tailspin.

No.

That was wrong.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

As the girl screamed and writhed on the ground, Mugino frowned slightly. It was similar to suddenly hearing a high-pitched electronic tone over a telephone call.

"Ahh…Ahh… I've gotten so used to it that I completely forgot about that possibility."

The bright dots of light disappeared from her vision.

A sharp headache as though a needle and thread had been drawn from her right temple to her left temple caused Mugino to grimace.

"*One of my eyes is a high performance artificial. You electromagnetically interfered with it to make me see something that isn't actually there.*"

"A-ahbah. Ahbabbababababbababbababaababababaababab."

“Hmm. I don’t see how you could interfere with my hearing, so are you using some stupid trick like a voice changer?”

She used a hand to cover the fake eye, but the illusion did not disappear. In fact, even when she closed both eyes, she could still distinctly see Frenda floating in the darkness.

Kinuhata Saiai of the dark side must have finally heard the commotion because she came running up.

The girl of around 12 frowned and said, “Um…Why are you super playing around with some middle-aged man?”

“Oh, is it some old man? My fake eye has been cracked, so I can’t tell. It seems he wanted me to see him as Frenda.”

“Well, I guess that makes sense. Frenda did dress in a way I bet older men would super like.”

“He must really need to get laid if he’s resorted to crossdressing.” Mugino sounded utterly annoyed. “But this is just pathetic. It lacks the ingenuity of the dark side. You could at least have been cruel enough to have some comrade of yours appear just when I thought I had won, right?”

“Bababababababababbbaaababbahhbah?!”

As Frenda (?) held the new end of lost arm with the other hand, she began scooting backwards while in a sitting position. Mugino had no way of knowing if the attacker’s arm had really been destroyed or if the attacker was even truly in the same location as Frenda.

The attacker shouted out in a wavering voice with an unstable interval that was something like a mix between a lively girl’s voice and a middle-aged man’s voice.

“Bbahhbhah!! H-how? How, dammit!? The data said you had left the dark side… I-if you’re living a peaceful life, you c-c-can’t kill!!”

“Kinuhata, I’m not sure what this guy is trying to say. Could you translate for me?”

“Can’t help you. I super don’t understand loser talk.”

“Y-you reconciled…owww…you reconciled with Hamazura. Bhh…You reconciled with him…You decided to live a proper life and walk in the same world as him!! Then! Then…!!”

“Sigh…So that’s it.” Mugino scratched at her head in annoyance. “As long as I have Hamazura, this is fine.”

“…What?”

"I'll get into trouble and into fights. There will even be deadly fights. But it will all work out in the end. No matter how many people I kill and how much I destroy, everything will be resolved in the end somehow and we can all be happy. *All my past experiences have shown that to be true.*"

The atmosphere and overall mood suddenly grew colder.

Some kind of strange rule that did not exist anywhere on the earth covered that area.

"That's how it was during the fight between Item and School. That's how it was when we fought underground in District 23. That's how it was when we met during the fierce fighting of World War III. And so I know it will be fine as long as I have Hamazura. *No matter what happens, he will forgive me in the end.*"

Kinuhata quietly sighed from her position outside Mugino's field of vision.

They had no idea who that attacker worked for, but he had misread the situation on a fundamental level.

Just because a happy ending had been reached did not mean all the death and violence had forever ended.

Depending on how the happy ending had been accepted, it could be dyed in grotesque and psychedelic colors.

And…

One must not think of Mugino Shizuri's sensibility as being of the same type as a normal person's.

A monster was a monster.

Even if reconciliation had been achieved, it did not mean her basic nature had been changed to something clean and refreshing.

The #4 gave a thin, thin smile.

"And more importantly, Academy City is filled with oddities."

"…?"

"*At least enough oddities to allow someone to live despite having an arm and an eye blown away, burns all over her body, and a portion of her organs boiled from the inside.* So don't worry. Four or five blasts from my Meltdowner is not enough to kill someone. As long as they are in this city, at least."

“B-bgh!!
Bababababababababbababababbbbababababbababbababaabababababbaaabab
abababababaababababbaabbababababbababbababaabababababaababa!?”

The attacker disguised as Frenda was almost foaming at the mouth by the time he looked over at Kinuhata. A desperate plea for help could be seen in his eyes. But Kinuhata merely shrugged as if she had given up on something.

She gave the most help she could to the man.

“At least make sure he doesn’t super die.”

“That still leaves a lot I can do, unfortunately. Technological revolutions really do make you think, don’t they?”

A beam of light flashed.

It was followed by several more. They looked like camera flashes or nearby strikes of lightning.

After it was all over, they dragged the battered attacker (it is best not to give a detailed explanation of his state) to some strange research facility and left him there. On the way back, Mugino and Kinuhata spoke together casually.

“So who was he?”

“I get the feeling a super lot is going on in the city today.”

The two were in as excellent form as ever.

But since Hamazura would probably cry if he saw what happened, they decided to keep it a secret.

Part 2

Something was odd.

By the time Yomikawa Aiho of Anti-Skill noticed the oddity, several hours had passed since midnight.

She parked the special vehicle lent to her on the side of the road and checked with her colleagues using the vehicle’s radio.

“Sumomo, Kurumi, Hakutou. …Have you noticed it yet?”

“Yeah.”

“Should we change our bandwidth to speak privately?”

“With how *obvious* it is, do you really think it could have slipped past us?”

The outer wall of the windowless building had been destroyed and they were tracking whoever had escaped. That was the emergency situation for which Anti-Skill had been deployed. For that purpose all information that could be found was being gathered from around the city and that mixture of both real and false information was being analyzed by the deskwork group.

However…

“Information is suddenly disappearing at an almost amusing rate.”

“It feels like having a fish escape your hook. Or maybe like someone hiding underwater removed the hook.”

“Wait, wait, wait! This really isn’t something we should be discussing over the official bandwidth. You’re wondering who could pull off a trick like that, right?”

“Kurumi, you’re the one saying the most dangerous stuff. …But I do agree this reeks of someone inside the organization manipulating the information.”

Technically, the information had not been completely cut off. All of them were still being instructed to hunt down “someone”.

But to use the fishing metaphor, they were not getting a single “bite”.

“Can you find anything in the footage from the satellites and security robots?” asked Yomikawa.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Even in places where there should be someone there, they’ve disappeared like a zit on a pin-up idol’s face.”

“Then what about the search reports up to now?”

“Um, the server is having a really slow response time… Do you think this is a sign that someone is destroying files while disguising it as server trouble?”

Yomikawa clicked her tongue.

She then added, “Sumomo, Hakutou. Head as quickly as possible to the station. Secure the paper reports. If you can’t, then retrieve the temporary cache from the copier.”

“Understood, understood. But I get the feeling whoever is behind this has set it up so they’ll *always be a step ahead of us*.”

“Kurumi, you come with me. We’ll try to search out whoever tries to interfere with Sumomo and Hakutou’s actions.”

“Fine, but whoever it is is probably listening to our conversation right now.”

“Then let’s startle them by declaring war.”

While grinding the shift lever more than necessary, Yomikawa drove off in the special vehicle.

She doubted everything would go as planned.

But even with that honest prediction, she did not resign herself to the fangs of the one she pursued. Even if she was being driven to the side as a side character, she did not lose her right to sink her teeth into her prey’s side.

Part 3

It was just before dawn.

A wet sound could be heard.

“…? …???”

A white hand was pressed against a concrete wall. The slender arm stretching from it bent creepily as it forcefully held up a woman’s weight. The axis running along the center of her body wobbled back and forth and she looked like she could shrink down like a deflating balloon at any moment.

She was Fräulein Kreutune.

She supported her weight with a hand against a building wall and her other hand covered half of her face. Her eyes writhed around unnaturally and a powerful look of doubt could be seen on her face.

Her breath was hot.

The feeling of something catching in the back of her throat continued no matter what she did.

Every pipe in her body itched. She could not get rid of a strange feeling like all of her internal organs were filled with tiny spider webs.

Something was missing.

Fräulein Kreutune’s thought process did not work the same as a primate’s brain that produced complex feelings. Her mind was more like an insect’s that decided everything via yes or no questions. Was it hot or cold? Was it sweet or spicy? Was it damp or dry? When thousands or tens of thousands of those questions were piled on top of each other, it looked as if she was producing more complex thoughts.

It was no different from how a high-level conversation program was actually nothing but a long string of ones and zeros.

Like a long line of breaker switches being thrown at once, Fräulein Kreutune's set of "simple decisions" piled up.

That giant collection of yes or no answers brought a single idea to her mind.

Something was missing.

A wet sound could be heard.

She was in a back alley where the wall and ground were dirtied by some strange liquid. The hand supporting her weight slipped and she collapsed to the ground. While lying face down with her oddly long silver hair spread out around her, those simple decisions continued.

The eye peering out from a gap in her hair spun around with tremendous speed.

Her breathing sounded like a broken flute.

And then…

"It doesn't really matter that much I suppose, but what do you think about the fact that an 8 year old was able to sleep until dawn on a plaza bench just because she was tired!? This is one hell of a safe country!!"

"…Hamazura. If she often falls asleep early because she is too tired, does that mean her dental health is still in trouble?"

A boy and a girl entered the back alley with loud footsteps. …No, technically, there was a third person with them. A small girl was asleep on the back of the boy with the dyed hair.

Hamazura Shiage.

Takitsubo Rikou.

Fremea Seivelun.

Due to the lack of illumination, they did not notice Fräulein Kreutune collapsed in the back alley at first.

"Hm? What is that!? An especially motivated drunk?"

"I almost stepped on her."

And that was why they approached her. Why they carelessly approached her.

As she lay face down on the ground with her hair sprawled out around her, her fingers writhed like insects legs. The lips hidden by her bangs

trembled…melted…opened. Her mouth grew thinner and thinner, wider and wider. The white line of teeth within glittered like a saw.

It had of course not been reported to the general public, but the following report had been made to certain groups:

If Fräulein Kreutune feels it necessary, *she will eat another's brain to acquire its abilities.*

She stirred.

Someone that could only be described as a monster or a beast slowly rose.

Her oddly warm breathing grew more quickly paced.

At this point, Hamazura finally frowned in confusion.

But it was too late.

Using an action that was more like sending her body weight tumbling forward than it was "walking", Fräulein Kreutune decisively shortened the distance between herself and Hamazura. Then she made it to the distance that could only be called "zero".

And…

While pressing herself up against the concrete wall, she passed by Hamazura and the others.

Fräulein Kreutune left while making oddly wet sounding footsteps.

"…?"

Hamazura turned around without thinking.

And then he realized he had no idea why he even turned around.

But…

His forehead was covered in sweat. Even in the chilly early morning air, several beads of sweat could be seen. It was only once he had felt them flow down past his nose and to his chin that he noticed the change to his body.

His shoulders were trembling.

His knees felt like they would give way beneath him.

The central axis he needed to keep his balance had been horribly shaken.

For the dozen or so seconds it had taken for the woman to pass, his breathing had completely stopped.

He was in the same state as a human who had been thrown into a cage with a wild beast.

“What…was that..?”

That question filled his mind.

He was partially asking about the identity of the woman who had been collapsed in the alley.

But…

He was also asking about the words she had muttered with her oddly hot breath as she left.

The following words had slipped into Hamazura’s ears.

“…It isn’t her.”

Part 4

“How horrible,” muttered the Saint named Silvia within a building at night.

The windows had been covered so the vast floor contained no illumination. She was a mysterious woman who was wearing a work apron, thick work clothes and pants, and industrial goggles on her forehead. However, her overall silhouette somehow looked like that of a maid.

She was in District 12, the district with many religious facilities.

The building itself was a standard high-rise building, but this vast floor contained no thresholds and small stones were placed underfoot. The majority of the floor had been turned into a wooden Buddhist temple. However, the entire building was not an exclusively Buddhist facility. A different floor contained a Shinto shrine with a giant torii at the entrance.

“This really is horrible. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything try so hard yet miss so badly,” said Silvia in shock as she retrieved a long laundry rope using only snaps of the wrist.

“It is an unpleasant structure,” said Brunhild Eiktobel with a short sigh.

She wore a short dress with pants underneath and modern protectors covering her arms, legs, and chest. Her silhouette resembled armor and the addition of decorative feathers on her head made her reminiscent of the maidens of battle from Norse legend.

She was a Saint as well.

Just the two of them could, based on raw strength alone, smash a magical base that had been created by turning an entire city into a religious fortress.

“Even though this place was elaborately constructed down to the micron, it does not actually possess a single magical symbol. This is nothing more than a model based on the cycles and patterns needed to efficiently bring people in and take their money.”

“Yeah, but don’t you think this was eerily planned out?”

Silvia shrugged.

The action seemed ill suited to that darkness that was void of illumination.

“A clear line has been drawn in order to avoid having the territories of science and magic cross. Think of it like running barefoot across a minefield. …Wouldn’t it seem oddest to make it across without stepping on a single one?”

“Any sign of Marian Slingeneyer?”

“I think we all knew the answer to that from the moment we found no traps on our way in.”

Silvia and Brunhild Eiktobel both looked in the same direction.

Standing in that direction was a short blonde girl.

“…”

She was Leivinia Birdway.

She was the one who had acquired the information from the student handbook she had swiped from Kamijou Touma.

She was the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, a magic cabal that claimed to be one of the foremost cabals even in the great magic nation of England. The established theories regarding the difference between a Saint’s power and a normal person’s did not apply to her. Even if she could not stand up to them in a straight competition of strength, she possessed the knowledge and skill to construct an alternative route to their defeat.

Silvia casually spoke to that monster.

“Do you think we were tricked?”

“…Perhaps. The sole religious district in the city sounded promising, but wax food samples are not enough to fill your stomach. But that boy certainly has grown if he had it in him to be plotting something like this while all that was going on.”

“C’mon, don’t get so upset. After tricking him for your own purposes so much, is it really right to get mad when he returns the favor just once? But I

do understand why you would be so panicked. This surprise attack has cost you the perfect timing to apologize."

"I hope you're prepared for a slap powerful enough to sink a warship."

At any rate, the information in Kamijou Touma's student handbook had been a miss.

They found no sign of Marian Slingeneyer or anyone else from Gremlin.

Brunhild Eiktobel calmly asked, "What should we do next?"

"We now have to question whether Kamijou Touma even has a connection with Marian Slingeneyer. …But he had to have a reason to make us think he did. That boy lied in order to distance us from something. What do you think it was?"

"…So we start with that line of reasoning, hm?"

"It had to be something we would have naturally come across had he not distanced us from it. If we continue along the established rails, we might find something interesting."

Part 5

It was 8 AM.

That was the exact time the free time of the Ichihanaransai began. It was the time most often used for open campuses and trial enrollments and was said to be directly linked to the number of students wishing to go to each school. It was an important time in which people made a start dash for the school in which they were interested.

"Noooooo

When she had approached the main entrance of a certain high school for the trial enrollment, she had unexpectedly run into the young lady known as Academy City's #5☆

"Why? Why did I have to run into that horrible #5 of all people!!!???"

The #5. That girl had the Mental Out ability which was the highest ranked mental power. She was a student at Tokiwadai Middle School just like Mikoto. The #5 who had created the largest clique in the school and the #3 who had no interest in cliques whatsoever were often compared and contrasted.

(It's always mental attacks vs. physical attacks, clique vs. solitude, long hair vs. short hair, or large breasts vs. small breasts!! Everyone always says whatever they want and I just hate that kind of thinking! And it isn't just that I take issue with that last one!!)

Naturally, the two of them did not get along.

Naturally, the two of them often got into disagreements.

This was someone with whom Mikoto would often butt heads with as they glared at each other, so she could guess just what that treacherous #5 would do if she found out Mikoto had been nervously heading for a trial enrollment in that high school.

“Waahhh!! She’s controlling all the people around here to chase after me!!”

With movements that gave a vaguely insect-like impression, men and women both old and young chased Mikoto around.

A middle-aged man with a combover who may have been an office worker or a high school teacher began speaking in a domineering fashion as if he was a digital voice recorder being played back.

“Heh heh heh heh heh heh. Misaka-san, you certainly have become a lot more ladylike since I saw you last. Did you perhaps have something bad to eat? After all, Misaka-san, I never thought I would see that look on your face. Hee hee.”

“I’ll kick your ass, you damn old man!!” she shouted despite knowing he was only a victim.

She wanted to capture Mikoto and tease her into submission, but she did not like taking action for herself.

The thought process truly did reek of the #5.

But…

Mikoto did not have time to put up with the #5’s pranks and she would refuse even if she did have the time. As Mikoto approached an overpass, she unhesitatingly jumped over the handrail. As she did, she manipulated magnetism to support her body as if by an invisible rope and swung forcefully underneath the overpass.

It was similar to a shell being fired.

It could be seen as similar to the action of jumping from a swing multiplied by a hundred or more.

As Mikoto’s small body was “fired” from the overpass, she glided for about 200 meters without landing. At that point, she manipulated magnetism once more to lower her speed before landing. Her feet ultimately struck the lid of a metal dumpster.

A loud clang rang out.

“Not good, not good… I need to get out of here,” muttered Mikoto as she hopped down from the dumpster.

But then she frowned.

(…Huh? Why was that #5 even here in the first place???)

She had no answer to that question.

If she waited around too much, she would lose the distance she had gained with her acrobatics. She needed to get away while her pursuers had lost sight of her.

And after Misaka Mikoto left, a creaking noise as if from a badly-fit door could be heard.

It was coming from the lid to the metal dumpster she had landed on.

"…What was that?"

After opening the heavy lid, Kamijou Touma looked around in confusion. When he had left the hospital, he had been wearing a hospital gown, but now he wore a simple shirt and pants.

The costumes used for cafes or haunted houses were not necessarily made from scratch. Sometimes, shirts and pants from cheap clothing stores would be bought in bulk and then altered to create the costumes.

But not all of the attempts would go well. And so the dumpsters near schools were often overflowing with cheap clothes that had been unsuccessfully altered.

He wanted to pursue Fräulein Kreutune, but he could not let each and every Anti-Skill and Judgment member take note of him.

And so after changing from his hospital gown into the bare minimum of shirt and pants, Kamijou searched for Fräulein Kreutune or Thor while also taking a detour to any dumpster he spotted. He wanted to make his outfit out of "failures" that looked as normal as possible so that he would look less suspicious.

He had been in the middle of that when the Biri Biri meteor shower had suddenly rained down from above.

He had just opened the dumpster lid and peered inside, so if he had not immediately dived inside, he may have been sentenced to a guillotine penalty☆ that separated his upper body from his lower body.

"Come to think of it, I wonder what's happened with Fräulein Kreutune. She would probably stand out a lot too."

Kamijou arbitrarily grabbed a sports jacket and climbed out of the dumpster. He looked around and headed for a larger road as he put on the jacket.

(Ow…Dammit. Blood isn't going to seep out and stain it, is it?)

By mere chance, he headed in the opposite direction of Mikoto.

Part 6

Last Order refused to eat her breakfast.

"Mr. Guardian."

"…Don't pass everything off to me."

Yoshikawa Kikyou and Accelerator were speaking within the apartment's dining room. Even though the date had changed, the proper owner of the apartment, Yomikawa Aiho, had not returned. She may have been forced to spend all night on patrol thanks to the Ichihanaransai.

Last Order was pushing a plate with a fried egg on it towards Accelerator and a plate with plain toast on it towards Yoshikawa.

"Today is the Ichihanaransai!! announces Misaka as Misaka puts her hands on her hips!!"

"Just give it a rest and eat your damn breakfast."

"Gyahh! A landslide of potato salad is being poured onto Misaka's plate, says Misa-…!!"

"What does today being the Ichihanaransai have to do with breakfast? Now hurry up and finish your corn soup."

Soprano screams continually sounded off within that mansion in the early morning.

Last Order had slightly teary eyes as she looked at the piles of food before her eyes.

"The Ichihanaransai is when they have cultural festivals at all the schools, right? says Misaka as Misaka asks for confirmation. Then Misaka wants to go around to all the food stands at the schools and try the trial enrollments, says Misaka as Misaka announces her plans for the day! And so Misaka needs to have an empty stomach, says Misaka as Mi-…"

“The Ichihanaransai, hm? Oh, Last Order. I thought I told you not to take apart your meat-stuffed bell peppers. As a penalty, you get this bell pepper hell.”

“Noo!! Why are you attacking Misaka with reverse starvation tactics even after she explained her reasoning!? says Misaka as Misaka complains about an extremely luxurious problem!!”

Accelerator let out a small sigh as he glanced over at the shouting Last Order.

He thought for a bit and then spoke to Yoshikawa.

“Hey, Yoshikawa.”

“Let’s pile a whole bunch of them up and-…Hm? What is it?”

“Come to think of it, what do you plan to do about a school for this brat?”

“That’s a good question,” said Yoshikawa with a casual sigh. “You are just as much of a collection of top rank classified information as she is, but you still have a public identity. After all, you are registered as Academy City’s #1. On the other hand, Last Order is the type that does not even have an Academy City ID and does not officially exist. The production of human clones is banned by international law. …Her very existence would be a scandal for Academy City, so it would be difficult to get her into a school through the normal process.”

“…”

“But while Last Order is an individual, she is also a part of the ego of the Misaka Network as a whole. All the knowledge, skills, emotions gained from living in a group, and emotional stimuli that people normally learn in their school life can be gained by exchanging information over the network, so the situation may not be as serious as it seems at first glance.”

(You really are a researcher when it comes to that, aren’t you?)

Despite thinking that, Accelerator refrained from saying it.

Accelerator knew well what end was reached in the pursuit of efficiency and logic. He had been part of those “gifted programs” in which he sat in the only desk within a large classroom. In that world, the voices of the other children his age he could hear from the halls were treated as nothing but background noise. To put it kindly, he did not see that as a happy world.

Yoshikawa seemed to want to abandon the path of the researcher and head down the path of the educator, but she had also once said that she did not have the qualifications. And she was right in a way. She was unable to see the meaning behind supposedly pointless and unnecessary things, so even if

she could teach her students to get perfect scores on their tests, it was possible she could not do anything beyond that.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” replied Accelerator. “I have nothing to say to you. I just hope you’re prepared to overcome that side of yourself.”

“?”

Yoshikawa looked confused, but Accelerator was not the type to give any more help than that.

Instead, he spoke to Last Order.

“Hurry up and eat. We’ll head out once you do.”

“Gnyaahhh! Misaka’s empty stomach strategy has failed already…hm? Head out? asks Misaka as Misaka tilts her head in confusion.”

“It’s nothing much. I need some winter boots. If there are any schools on the way to the store, I suppose we can stop by.”

Last Order and Yoshikawa both fell silent.

The silence lasted for about a second and a half.

It was of course Last Order that began moving first. She stretched her small body as much as she could to forcefully stand up.

“Misaka makes a dash for the door while reminding you that the early bird gets the worm! says Misa-…!!”

“Accelerator, please grab that child right this instant!!”

Yoshikawa and Accelerator hurriedly restrained Last Order before she could charge off onto the path of the lost child once more.

Part 7

With the broken bone finally healed, the girl known as Misaka Worst had been able to say farewell to the annoying cast.

The sense of liberation it gave her was part of the reason that she had uncontrollably immersed herself in the nightlife. That girl with short brown hair who wore a pure white ao dai extracted the focused negative portions of the information network known as the Misaka Network created by linking the brains of almost 10,000 clones. Naturally, it meant that her negative side came out stronger.

And so…

“Kuro-nyaaaaannn. If you have nothing to do, you can play with Misaka.”

“Noooooo

“You’re a military clone whose mere existence violates international law. Should you really be out in public like this?”

“How should Misaka know? It might be causing someone some problems, but that person isn’t Misaka.”

That was when another girl walked up along the pedestrian bridge.

The girl had short hair and wore the uniform of the prestigious powers development school known as Tokiwadai Middle School.

However, she was not the Original named Misaka Mikoto.

She was the military clone labeled Sister #10032 but more commonly known as Misaka Imouto.

For some reason she had removed one of her loafers and was holding it in one hand.

Kuroyoru spat out, “There, you have a friend.”

“Misaka hates, hates, hates clean and tidy people like her. Misaka only wants to speak to people with a nasty look in their eyes.”

“…Everything you say tells me that you have no intention of being my friend.”

Misaka Worst ignored Kuroyoru’s scornful glare and waved to Misaka Imouto with the cotton candy stick.

“Hey, what are you doing? It’s good to see you’re as eccentric as ever.”

“Misaka removed her shoes to rest her feet while taking a break on a bench and this black cat climbed inside one, reports Misaka.”

A closer look at Misaka Imouto’s student loafer showed that a black kitten had indeed occupied it like a hermit crab. Even when she turned the shoe upside down and lightly shook it, the cat did not come out. It must have been stretching out its legs and digging in with its claws.

The black cat usually acted very nervous, but it seemed very bold today for some reason. It seemed to be saying, “This is my house now! I will not let you evict me!”

With a puzzled look, Misaka Worst said, “Couldn’t you just drag it out with an iron claw?”

“Go to hell, loner, spits out Misaka in response to this black-hearted monster.”

Though, since they were both existences controlled by the single large will of the Misaka Network, that opinion had technically once existed within Misaka Imouto as well.

Ignoring that response, Misaka Worst said, “Three still isn’t enough. Is there no one else around here with nothing to do?”

She glanced around the area and spotted an incredibly disgusted expression.

The expression belonged to a girl named Kinuhata Saiai.

The expression was directed more at Kuroyoru Umidori than it was at Misaka Worst or Misaka Imouto.

“Oh? Ohh? Now who could that be? She certainly does have the same nasty look to her though. Nyahah.”

Those who worked in the underground of the city learned how to keep track of their surroundings on their own.

Since someone always glancing around would look suspicious, an expert would avoid doing so because being taken in for questioning or having one’s possessions searched would be a problem for them. And a human’s field of vision was wider than the average person thought. By learning how to use the entirety of one’s almost 160 degree field of vision and also using things like the body of a cell phone, show windows, drink bottles, and the side mirrors of parked cars, one could gather information from the entirety of their surroundings with a bare minimum of motions.

But anyone that understood those table manners could spot others who were using them.

Basically, you needed to keep an eye on anyone who had a slightly odd focal point to their eyes or who underreacted to a car honking or revving its engine in their blind spot.

Misaka Worst had been referring to that type of characteristic when she had referred to the “nasty look” in the eyes.

Incidentally, the normal Sisters tended to be negligent in that kind of effort since they could always gather information from the Misaka Network if something happened.

From the look in Kinuhata Saiai’s eyes, one would have thought she was looking at vomit on a subway platform.

“So are all the villains super creating their own faction?”

“Misaka likes how this is turning out. With dark people like you around, she could enjoy the Ichihanaransai honestly without holding back, nyan.”

Part 8

Fremea Seivelun awoke while riding on Hamazura Shiage’s back.

“Mnyah…Ah!? Hamazura, where have you been all this time!! In the first place, we can’t have you getting lost like that, nyah nyah!!”

“Ow! Don’t pull on my hair! And an 8 year old who disappeared all night and went to sleep on a plaza bench has no room to lecture me!!”

Fremea had been sleeping in the plaza in front of a station in District 7 whereas her room was in a student dormitory in District 13. Normally, they would have used the train to cross district borders, but Hamazura and the others were still walking through District 7.

The girl walking next to Hamazura wearing a pink track suit, Takitsubo Rikou, let her gaze wander blankly around the area until it landed on an airship with a giant screen on it.

“...Hamazura, that says the trains still are not running.”

“So did some animal really get loose?”

It seemed some school had gathered different rare pets to create a simple zoo for the Ichihanaransai. However, some giant pet had gotten loose from its mobile cage on the station platform that morning and caused a panic when it got down onto the tracks.

“I had us following the tracks as we walked, but at this rate we’re going to reach District 13 before the trains are back up and running.”

“I haven’t seen any buses either.”

“I think they’ve intentionally reduced the number of buses running. That way people are more likely to stop by schools along the way.”

But then Fremea let out a strange voice from his back.

“Nyahh. In the first place, I’m hungry.”

“I’m sure your dorm manager is going to be mad, so shouldn’t you be more focused on coming up with an excuse? Then again, they’ll probably be mad at us too. They’ll probably be super mad at us.”

“I! Want!! Breakfast!!!”

“I-idiot!! Don’t pull at my hair like you’re pulling up weeds! A boy of my age shouldn’t have to worry about his scalp!!”

Hamazura was hoping to take off the edge of her hunger at some school’s Ichihanaransai food stall, but it seemed they were not quite open yet.

He felt like they were losing out, but they ended up heading to a gyudon restaurant that served breakfast meals.

“I want roast salmon! I want a roast salmon meal!! For toppings, I want grated yam, natto, seaweed salad, jumbo grated radish, a small bowl of pickled vegetables, mango, and pudding… Make it all extravagant, nyah nyah!”

“Fremea, you’re supposed to choose only one topping.”

Takitsubo quickly ordered a sukiyaki-style gyudon.

When Fremea saw the small bowl the worker brought out, her eyes opened wide.

“That’s tiny! What a pitiful woman! Nyahh!!”

“Mh.”

“In the first place, the idea of girls not eating much is just an illusion! It’s obvious you’re putting up with an empty stomach to preserve your image! Nyah nyah!!”

“…Hamazura, I need to perform an iron claw on that brat, so scoot over.”

As Hamazura restrained the track-suit-wearing girl in the busy restaurant, Fremea gave a haughty snort and made a loud announcement.

“I want rice, miso soup, and salad. Make it a Jumbo 3! Nyah! Three!!”

And 7 minutes later, a pale-faced Fremea pushed three bowls the size of a watermelon sliced in half towards Hamazura. As she held her mouth as if she was about to explode, she managed to get out a small voice.

“…N-nyah. In the first place, the rest is up to you.”

“It looks to me like you did nothing more than scrape a bit off the surface of the bowls.”

In the end, Hamazura had no choice but to do battle with the ridiculous bowls Fremea had ordered.

But once they had all finished eating and were preparing to leave the gyudon restaurant, Fremea suddenly said, “Nyah!! In the first place, I’m hungry again. I’m starving!”

"…Hamazura, I am going to stuff red pickled ginger in that brat's mouth, so scoot over."

Hamazura once more had to restrain the track-suit-wearing girl. The three of them somehow managed to leave the gyudon restaurant.

It seemed the time had finally come for guests to be let into the schools so the flow of people had clearly changed from before. It seemed they had chosen the worst possible time for breakfast.

But Fremea did not care in the slightest about the changes to her surroundings.

"I'm tired now… Hamazura, in the first place, you need to carry me."

"This brat!!"

"Takitsubo-san! Fremea is at a fickle age!! Actually, why are you even mad this time?"

Just as a confused look appeared on Hamazura's face, his head was tugged back from Takitsubo like a cat. As Hamazura was knocked back, Fremea casually climbed up his back.

"Nyah. This is where I can be the most relaxed…"

"That is my spot!!"

"W-wait, Takitsubo!! Please tell me why you're dragging that bus stop sign behind you in one hand!!"

Suddenly, Fremea's small head shot up from where she was clinging to Hamazura's back.

Her gaze accurately captured something she could not afford to overlook.

"Nyah…"

She saw a white-haired, red-eyed Level 5, a monster who used a cane and was known as Academy City's #1.

She saw a genius scientist who had helped develop military human clones that violated international law.

But Fremea was focused the girl who appeared to be around 10 years old who was walking along between the other two.

She saw her. They saw each other.

They spotted each other's faces, pointed across the street, and shouted out.

"It's the kid!!"

"What was that, you child!? says Misaka as Misaka lets out a roar!!"

Part 9

Kamijou Touma leaned up against a roadside tree, casually operated his cell phone, and sighed.

"…No good."

He had checked the regional message boards in hopes of finding some kind of information on sightings of Fräulein Kreutune since she was so strange looking, but he had found nothing.

Even though the festival had only just begun, the Ichihanaransai was a huge event. Even now, tons of photos and comments were being uploaded to the internet in rapid succession. The amount of information was likely greater than your average security camera network and it was being updated in real time, but he could find no sign of Fräulein Kreutune.

(The entire city is dyed in the colors of a cultural festival. Costumes and cosplay are pretty common. Could someone like Fräulein Kreutune just be buried under it all?)

Kamijou returned to the top page of the search engine and prepared to close the browser.

But his thumb froze in place before he did.

The top page was linked with a news site, so it had a few headlines listed. They were of course all related to the Ichihanaransai, so any normal incidents had completely disappeared.

"…"

But something bothered him.

Kamijou clicked the link labeled "see more news" below the headlines. In addition to the previous headlines, he was now shown every major piece of recent news.

He scrolled down to the bottom and started to catch glimpses of normal news unrelated to the Ichihanaransai such as a convenience store robbery and a case of tax evasion.

But…

"There isn't a thing related to Fräulein Kreutune?"

The windowless building's armor had been destroyed and at least four unmanned attack helicopters had been shot down. That incident had to be more noteworthy than a simple convenience store robbery.

Not to mention all the refrigerated trucks Thor had blown up. Normally, that alone would have caused a huge uproar over a terrorist attack targeting Academy City's head, the board chairman.

So what was going on?

Were they suppressing information on the event to prevent any unease and confusion that could delay the Ichihanaransai's schedule?

Or was someone specifically suppressing all online information regarding Fräulein Kreutune specifically?

"…Wait."

Since he had not found any information that could have been referring to Fräulein Kreutune in the comments on normal SNSs and message boards, perhaps it was not a case of no one commenting. It was possible all such comments were being blocked while disguising it as upload errors.

If that was the case…

(I might be able to use this to my advantage…)

Kamijou began operating his phone once more as he glanced through all the comments being made by normal students.

Today was the Ichihanaransai.

For better or for worse, small bits of news and trouble popped up with incredible frequency.

In other words, in a very broad and shallow meaning, there was no spot in which no news was occurring.

And yet there was a blank spot in which nothing was coming from.

Or rather, an unnatural spot had been created thanks to someone disguising it as an area where nothing was happening.

"…Found her!!"

Kamijou closed his phone with a snap and removed his weight from the roadside tree.

He ran down the pathway that had flows of people heading here and there for the events created for the open campuses and trial enrollments.

But this was not something he was overjoyed about.

If he could do it, so could someone else.

He had to contact Fräulein Kreutune before Gremlin or Ollerus's force found her using the same method.

Part 10

“How about a maid sandwich? Does anyone want a maid sandwich made by a maid…or technically, a maid apprentice?”

The drawling voice of a girl sitting seiza-style on top of a drum-shaped cleaning robot rang out within the busy street.

She was Tsuchimikado Maika.

She had short hair and wore a maid uniform with a long skirt. Like a popcorn salesgirl in a baseball stadium, she held a large case packed with sandwich boxes supported by a wide belt that wrapped around her neck and shoulders.

Robot, maid, and part-time salesgirl. The different elements were horribly mixed together.

Kumokawa Maria, a classmate from Ryouran Maid School walking next to her, let out a shocked voice.

“C’mon, Tsuchimikado. Your design has no unity to it.”

“Someone with black hair in ringlet curls and a miniskirt maid uniform colored yellow and black like a bee has no right to say anything.”

“Having your pride hurt is a good thing. You will never strengthen yourself otherwise. …But it’s best not to go down that route with no set goal. If you do, you can damage yourself beyond recovery.”

“Come to think of it, don’t you have a quota to sell? Where are your maid sandwiches?”

“With products, the label is everything. Yakisoba inexpertly made on the day of a festival seems to taste better than that of a veteran who has been on the street for 30 years. You can say it is 100% organic, or a limited production, or available for a limited time only…there are plenty of methods. The more stickers you can add to it, the better you will do.”

“Your point?”

“I attached a sticker of my face with the message ‘middle school girl maid looking for a future master☆’ and caused quite a commotion in just 10 minutes after I started. The teacher smacked me on the head as punishment, but I still managed to quickly free myself from my quota.”

“…I get the feeling you are the type that would feign food poisoning to get out of work.”

They had no idea what characters they were, but people in a bear and frog suit passed by.

During the large-scale cultural festival that was the Ichihanaransai, strange pieces of artwork could be seen walking around all over the city. Since they could be seen even out on the streets, one could only imagine what it was like at the actual schools.

Toy fish flew across the street without a propeller thanks to a balloon using a heating element and air. If one opened their cell phone, they would find AR signs all over the place.

And all of it was an attempt to draw in guests to one's own school.

While the Ichihanaransai was a giant cultural festival, it was also a time for open campuses and trial enrollments. As those events were directly linked to the number of people who wished to go to each school, the teachers often allowed the students to push the boundaries.

"But it seems girls are better at drawing in guests than strange technology."

"A maid does not need a sharp tongue like that."

Suddenly, something passed by the two girls.

After a few seconds, the maid apprentices quickly turned around at the exact same moment.

They were looking at the last glimpse of blonde hair they could see in the crowd.

"…Did you see that?"

"Yes, the way she moved her body… She may have been trying to hide it with that work apron and goggles, but that was the real deal…"

"She looked like the British style to me. Is she one of those rumored to work directly for the Royal Family?"

"What is a monster like that doing in Academy City? Has the queen been invited here or something?"

They tilted their heads in puzzlement, but the real maid was nowhere to be seen.

And Silvia the Saint muttered to herself with a puzzled frown.

"What is with this country? Does the word 'maid' mean something completely different here?"

"Those were just costumes for the festival. Don't think about it too much," said Brunhild Eiktobel who had both the characteristics of a Saint and a Valkyrie.

Leivinia Birdway who was walking with them must have been in a bad mood because she had not said a word for a while now.

That was when an amateurish voice claiming to be from a private broadcaster came from the giant screen on an airship in the sky.

“Um, we are here at the beauty contest being held at Eiri Academy High School. To continue…Oh! Here we have something very unique! We have a girl in bikini armor!!”

“This is…um…I think it’s called a Norse mythology motif,” said a female voice likely belonging to the contestant. “I think they are called Valkyries, but I’ve only ever seen them in RPGs. To be honest, I don’t see how this armor provides any defense with my stomach exposed like this, but it’s all sorts of sexy. And as you can see, I’m very heavenly and divine.”

An ominous sound like an old car being crushed by a giant press could be heard.

It was the sound of a street sign pole being crushed in Brunhild Eiktobel’s right hand.

“Oh, what’s this? What the hell do they think they are doing!?”

“It’s just a festival costume,” responded Silvia with a grin, but the veins on Brunhild’s temple only popped out further.

“I get it worst when it comes to having that kind of image forced on me… In fact, there are even some in the magic world! There are self-proclaimed maidens of battle that dance around all year in a bikini like some kind of pervert!!”

“But I doubt the Valkyries would always be illustrated as beauties if no one had ever wanted them to be sexy. And they married warriors in legend. Not to mention serving alcohol and using their bewitching dance to heal the hearts of the dead warriors in-…Okay, okay. I won’t say anything more.”

Silvia raised her hands playfully when she was about to become the target in a game of human whack-a-mole using a road sign as the hammer.

At the same time, Tsuchimikado Motoharu slowly pulled his hand out of his pocket from where he stood at the end of a line for a popcorn stand a bit away.

He was a normal student of Academy City as well as a spy for both the magic side and science side, but the current situation was hopeless even if he used every weapon at his disposal.

(C'mon, c'mon, c'mon. Don't make me sweat like that.)

His machine pistol and magic origami were no more valuable than pieces of candy in that situation.

He let out a slow sigh and watched those monsters of the magic world continue away from his stepsister.

(Two Saints and the boss of one of Britain's leading magic cabals. There's no way I could defeat them in a straight fight.)

But he was the kind of boy who would still do all he could to let his little sister escape in that situation.

Part 11

A wet sound could be heard.

There was a certain narrow area that seemed to be crushed between two buildings where not a single ray of light fell for even a single second during the day. In that area, someone was headed for the wide main road with a hand against the wall and their barefoot feet audibly crushing something underfoot.

A whistling sound of labored breathing could be heard.

She was Fräulein Kreutune.

She must have fallen over time and again while walking because her white dress-like outfit was covered in mud. Her hair was in complete disarray. Very, very small yet hot breaths leaked from her mouth.

An artificial electronic tone sounded from behind her.

It was the shutter sound effect of a cell phone. One of the students walking along had decided to snap a picture because of how odd she looked. But the student then frowned. The data had been damaged during the upload and by some miracle the original master data had been lost too.

The same thing had happened dozens of times already, but the student had no way of knowing it.

Fräulein Kreutune had no way of knowing it either.

And it did not matter if she did.

Her gaze was fixed on only one thing.

It was fixed on the main road that was filled with sunlight. Several people were standing on the sidewalk talking rather than following any of the

flows of people. One was a white-haired, red-eyed Level 5 with a cane. One was an intellectual woman who would have looked good in a lab coat. One was a delinquent boy with his hair dyed brown. One was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl clinging to the delinquent boy's back. One was a girl in a pink track suit.

But Fräulein Kreutune was not looking at them.

She was looking at the girl with them who had short brown hair and appeared to be around 10 years old.

"…you," whispered Fräulein Kreutune.

She heard a clattering sound.

It was the sound of the student who had casually taken her picture dropping his cell phone from his trembling fingers.

He could hardly be blamed.

"*Found you.*"

Very, very shallow yet hot breaths spilled from the edges of her lips.

And those edges silently melted like cheese. The mouth split wider and wider along her face.

It was as if she was preparing to swallow some large object.

"*Found you.*"

Part 12

"…Found you," muttered a different figure from a building rooftop.

He was a slender boy wearing a high-class brand-name jacket. He was supposed to be pure Japanese, but his body was oddly white. Individual items such as his hair and clothes had a bit of coloration left, but this was nothing more than a gradation of color. There was no true distinction between his clothes and skin. The coloration had a conspicuous unnaturalness to it as if it was all added on top of a single item.

He was Kakine Teitoku.

He was Academy City's #2 Level 5.

Thanks to an intense battle in the past and the horrible research performed afterwards, he had lost over half of his internal organs. But he had turned the situation around by using his Dark Matter ability to make up for all of his lost organs.

“Found you, found you, found you. So that’s Fräulein Kreutune.”

When he opened his mouth, a deep darkness could be seen that clashed with the pale coloration of the rest of his body.

An oozing dark coloration could be seen filling his eye sockets as well. Even though this added to the number of colors making up his body, it created a bizarre balance that exacerbated the empty instability of his appearance.

His fingers and nails were made of the same whiteness, so the extremities of his flesh were much too unnatural to be human. In one such hand, he held a cell phone.

Unlike Gremlin and Ollerus’s group, Kakine was pursuing Fräulein Kreutune as a member of the science side rather than the magic side. He was to quickly capture that which had been sealed in the windowless building and seal it back from whence it had come. And he was expected to do his very best to accomplish that task.

However…

“*That doesn’t matter to me. I’m just going to do this the way I want to.*”

“Yes, yes,” agreed someone on the other end of the phone.

She was a woman wearing a cheap suit and a lab coat. The woman claimed to be a Kihara and she replied in an incredibly carefree manner despite being well aware of the risks. Despite everything she knew, she showed no concern in her response.

“Do this however you like. And try to smash even the worst case hypotheses we Kiharas have come up with. That is what we hope for. …*This destruction is sure to have wonderful meaning to science*. I am sure of it.”

“Oh?”

With that arbitrary response, Kakine Teitoku let go of the cell phone.

The delicate device was easily smashed when it struck the rooftop floor.

His gaze was not following his top priority target of Fräulein Kreutune.

He was looking at something else nearby.

He was looking at a certain person standing in the middle of the crowd. Kakine silently watched Academy City’s #1, that monster known as the strongest.

That strongest esper was the one who had once defeated Kakine Teitoku and smashed over half of his internal organs.

“…Let’s get this started.”

He snapped his fingers.

Something silently stood up from where it had been waiting nearby. There was one to the right. There was one to the left. And it did not end there. Figure after figure stood up. The building's entire rooftop was filled in no time at all.

No.

That was not all.

It did not end with that one building. It covered the entire area. Building rooftops all over the place were filled with figures.

They were all white.

They had the exact same coloration as Kakine Teitoku…or more specifically, as the Dark Matter he had used to replenish his lost flesh.

He cracked his neck.

As the #2 looked down at the peaceful world below, he muttered the same words once more.

"Let's get this started."

Part 13

The gates of hell opened.

Amid all the many goals and objectives, the one that pulled the trigger was Fräulein Kreutune.

She brought her hands to the ground along with her feet and shot out of the back alley while running like a carnivorous beast. She weaved through the gaps between people in the crowd and sometimes even ducked between their legs as she accurately charged along the quickest path to Accelerator, Hamazura, and the rest.

He was in the way.

That was the only reason she slammed into Hamazura, causing him to double over. It had not been a punch or a kick; she had simply charged straight into him. The violent tackle form the side struck him at the middle of his body and sent him flying several meters through the air.

"Nyah…!?"

Fremea had still been on his back, so she appeared to remain motionless in midair for a moment like the top of a daruma otoshi game.

Fräulein Kreutune's head turned. Her unnaturally split mouth and brightly glittering eyes turned straight towards the relatively low position of Last Order's head.

"Huh…?"

Last Order let out a confused voice as she clung to Yoshikawa's leg after the woman stepped forward to protect her. She recognized the face hidden by that long, long silver hair.

But…

"Gah!?"

Fräulein Kreutune ignored Yoshikawa who stood between them and prepared to charge at Last Order like a spider attacking its prey, but then…

The sole of Accelerator's shoe sank mercilessly into her face.

One of his hands was at his neck where he had already flipped the switch for his choker-style electrode.

He had released his power.

"*Fly*," was his one merciless word.

The #1 Level 5 could manipulate any and all vectors, and now he took action to send Fräulein Kreutune flying back with the same momentum with which she had been charging in their direction.

The human body was not a simple thing.

Just as many different changes could be seen when watching a rubber ball hit a wall in slow motion, extreme burden was put on the internal portions of the human body when it was forced into extreme movements. Burdens to the spine could be especially bad, and the question about this strike was whether the damage would stop at just a herniated disk or not.

But for Accelerator, this was being cautious. He was holding back.

If he manipulated the electric currents in the nerves or the flow of blood in the veins, he could cause a human being to literally explode from the inside.

However…

"!!!!!!"

Fräulein Kreutune's back rotated three full times.

Her lower body stayed exactly where it was and her upper body alone spun around.

A horrible sound came from within her body, but not a single drop of blood was shed and her expression did not show an ounce of pain.

(…What? She forced her body to rotate in order to eliminate the backwards momentum!?)

Her body was still twisted around like a spring within her white dress.

And despite what had happened, Fräulein Kreutune did not so much as glance at Accelerator. That #1 monster was of no consequence to her.

Her eyes were focused solely on her target.

She kept her gaze on Last Order.

Her lips writhed. Words slipped out along with her hot breath.

“Found you.”

And after forcefully turning aside Accelerator’s counterattack, Fräulein Kreutune continued along the shortest path to Last Order.

The look in Accelerator’s eyes changed.

This time, he did not hesitate.

He used everything that made him Academy City’s #1 in an attempt to completely kill this attacker in the slight bit of time he had left.

But then…

“Wait!! Don’t hurt Misaka’s friend!! says Misaka as Misaka shouts a warning!!”

He heard that girl’s voice.

This subconsciously dulled the #1’s movements.

His white fingertips just barely missed reaching Fräulein Kreutune.

And her mouth…

That mouth that was split oddly wide…

It opened.

And the instant after that…

With the sound of a great blast, Fräulein Kreutune’s upper body was bent to the side in an L-shape.

With her waist at the center, Fräulein Kreutune’s body was bent forcefully to the right. Since her lower body still stood straight up from the ground as before, it was a truly strange sight.

Several events had gone by in quick succession.

It felt like time had stopped.

But finally everything began to move once more.

When the dumbfounded students in the area finally realized the blast had come from a shell fired along a path that made its way through the gaps between them, an explosive panic suddenly fell over the crowd. People let out meaningless screams and people fled every which way, paying no heed to whether they were on the road or the sidewalk. Car horns blared and, in some places, people fell like small lines of dominos.

"…"

Accelerator let another kick fly towards Fräulein Kreutune who was still bent. This time she was unable to turn aside the momentum. She bounced and rolled for several dozen meters while still in her jumbled up state.

And then Accelerator looked in the direction the shell had come from.

He had assumed something like a tank had fired it…but he was wrong.

It had come from a giant white rhinoceros beetle that was 15 meters long.

Its form was constructed solely out of the curves, both gentle and sharp, found in biology. Its surface was covered with the same smooth luster as a new car.

However, its eyes let out an eerie green light and the tip of its thick horn shook. The thick horn was hollow as if its core had been removed, so that was likely the barrel. Despite having fired a shell, nothing like smoke could be seen coming from the barrel, so it may have used some special means of firing.

It was an eerie shade of white.

It was a familiar shade of white.

The rhinoceros beetle's armor opened up. Giant thin wings that had been folded up over its back spread out and began vibrating at high speed. Those vibrations produced something like a voice.

"Do you remember me?"

When Accelerator saw that bizarre material, saw the way the light and sound around it *was bent along strange vectors*, and most of all heard the voice produced by the vibration of the wings, he spoke as if spitting out the words.

"That's a voice I didn't even bother to remember."

"Well, it doesn't really matter."

“I thought you were a fairy tale bastard before, but this is almost laughable.”

“I am aware of that.”

New screams filled the air.

Accelerator could see the students who had tried to flee down other roads to escape the main road returning to the main road as if they were being pushed aside. They were followed by several more beetles. They appeared from all over the place. The giant pure white rhinoceros beetles used their 6 legs to move out to the main road.

“I won’t bother to ask whether you can fight while protecting your allies. …*I do not care about anyone but you. It doesn’t matter to me if anyone else is caught up in this or if they are blown to pieces*.”

“…What a tedious bastard,” spat out Accelerator.

If the beetles opened fire with their shells from multiple directions at once, he would make sure to protect at least Last Order and Yoshikawa Kikyou. He could protect the other people there by removing himself from the location. He could also protect them from stray shots by controlling the entire “location” like a billiards board, but it was still best to keep them from getting involved in the first place.

And that meant it would be best to completely lose the other boy, drop Last Order and Yoshikawa off at some safe place, and then return alone to confront Kakine Teitoku.

With that plan in mind, Accelerator looked up toward a building rooftop, viewing it as a wall he needed to surmount.

However…

“…”

“Did you really think that was all?”

Accelerator could see human figures standing on the edge of the building’s rooftop. There were enough of them to completely cover the edge. Completely identical figures covered almost all of the building rooftops along the road.

“So you decided to overwhelm me with numbers since you know you can’t defeat me in straight fight? With espers, quality matters more than quantity. As one of the Level 5s, I thought you would know that.”

“Did you really think that was all?”

The white rhinoceros beetle’s wings whispered the same words once more.

“Did you think I merely deployed tons of puppets made of Dark Matter? Did you think that was all the threat I could muster? C’mon now. The threat approaching before your eyes is known as the #2. Of course it isn’t going to end that easily.”

“You can’t mean…”

Those words were muttered by Yoshikawa, not Accelerator.

It may have been her experience as an Academy City researcher that allowed her to more keenly grasp the bizarreness of that possibility.

But the beetle continued speaking nonetheless.

It continued speaking the truth.

“I am able to reproduce my own organs. And the brain is no exception. And so it is not difficult to make an implementation for my Dark Matter ability. After all, the brain is nothing more than one of a human being’s internal organs.”

As if in response to his voice, giant wings appeared on the backs of the countless figures standing on the building rooftops.

“Although at this stage, it’s closer to creating some kind of cyborg than it is a Personal Reality. By producing ejection points for my power, they can all wield the power I distribute evenly. And even if the basic principle is different, I can still mass produce Dark Matter as a result. Then again, I’ll probably be able to construct full Personal Realities and make implementations of other people’s powers before long.”

The multiple rhinoceros beetles created a circle around Accelerator and began to slowly approach.

The countless white figures on the rooftops spread their wings wide in preparation to immediately crush Accelerator if he tried to take any kind of action.

“Now let’s begin the deadly battle. If this is enough to overwhelm you, then that’s that. If you are able to push back, I will have captured that many more varieties of possibility. Your strength will be directly used to level me up infinitely. …I look forward to finding out when the eternal chain of death will end.”

The #1 could destroy all.

The #2 could produce all.

Offense and defense.

That was the type of fight this was.

But Accelerator had an Achilles' heel. To use his #1 esper power, he needed to use his choker-style electrode to receive calculation support from the Misaka Network. That choker-style electrode that connected them had a battery and that battery gave him a 30 minute time limit.

The biggest danger for him was wasted time.

This was a never-ending battle yet he could not afford to hold back.

That sort of situation could cost him his life.

"(Hey,)" Accelerator whispered to Yoshikawa Kikyou next to him. "(I'm going to destroy the ground with my foot. A subway tunnel runs underneath. The rest of you need to use the tunnel and the passageways for workers to escape.)"

"(What about you?)"

"(I'll stay here to crush these eyesores.)"

He did not wait for a response.

With an explosive roar, the ground completely crumbled away within a 10 meter radius of Accelerator. Yoshikawa Kikyou, Last Order, Takitsubo Rikou, Fremea, and Hamazura Shiage were within that range and they fell down below.

Only Accelerator, the one who had caused it, shot straight up like a rocket.

Once he reached the exact same height as the nearest building rooftop, the #1 and the #2's eyes met.

And then everything began to move.

"Do it," said the #2.

In the next instant, the #2's whiteness rushed in from all directions toward the #1's whiteness.

Part 14

"Nyahh!!"

Fremea let out a short scream as she rolled down into the subway tunnel.

Yoshikawa stood up and tapped on the hard floor with her foot.

"You can see the good side of that boy in how he makes sure we don't sprain our ankles in the fall. If only he would let that side out more often."

Meanwhile, Hamazura had not fared so well.

He had not been injured in the collapse the #1 had caused, but he had still been struck by Fräulein Kreutune earlier. He was still suffering from a dull pain like a hammer had been swung down on his ribs.

“Hamazura, are you okay?” asked Takitsubo.

“I-I couldn’t feel much worse…”

Fremea also looked over worriedly at Hamazura, but she then felt a tug on her clothes.

She looked over to find Last Order puffing out her cheeks.

“Hey, child, says Misaka as Misaka makes up her mind to speak with you.”

“Nyah, what is it, kid?”

When Fremea replied, Last Order switched over to whispering mode for some reason.

“That lady was the King of the Informed from yesterday, wasn’t she? says Misaka as Misaka checks to be sure.”

“I-in the first place, I don’t think someone as kind as her would hurt Hamazura!! …Huh? Nyah, nyah.”

“Attention everyone,” said Yoshikawa as she clapped her hands to gather attention. “That boy bought this time for us at his own risk. Whatever our individual issues may be, we need to escape from the #2.”

“No argument here,” replied Hamazura while noticing a distinct flavor of iron in his mouth. “That was the #1 and the #2. I can instinctually tell both of them are bad news. Whether they intend to or not, just being in the same place as them could get us smashed to pieces. It’s obvious what would happen if we tried to support him without any real plan.”

“So you’re saying you would go back if you could come up with a plan?” asked Yoshikawa for confirmation, but Hamazura irresponsibly averted his gaze. For someone he thought of as a stranger, that #1 always seemed to be involved in the major crossroads of his life. And it was happening again.

At any rate, they needed to escape.

After that, he would observe from afar in hopes of finding an opening in the #2’s defenses and provide support if he found anything.

With a general plan in mind, Hamazura and the others began walking through the dark tunnel.

But then they heard an odd buzzing noise coming from deep in the darkness. It sounded like the vibrations of some large device operating. But

that was not what it was. Hamazura had seen what caused that noise not long before. It was coming from giant wings beating the air.

“The rhinoceros beetles!!”

As soon as Hamazura came to that realization, the vibrations of the air changed to a “voice” a human could understand as if a radio dial had been tuned to a proper station.

“Checking oral order. ‘Destroy any and all elements that obstruct our mission.’ …Beginning value conversion for shift to autonomous tactics order.”

Unlike before, the voice sounded like that of a recorded operator.

And it was not just a single voice.

“Compilation of autonomous tactics order complete.”

“Primary objective determined.”

“Checking effectiveness of eliminating the reason behind Fräulein Kreutune’s actions.”

“Battlefield determined, target action time determined, ideal ammunition expenditure determined. Preparations for attack on Last Order and surrounding people complete. Executing autonomous tactics order under additional rule requiring minimal damage to surrounding environment.”

Several green lights glittered in the darkness.

As they slowly approached, the silhouettes of several giant rhinoceros beetles grew visible. The giant cannons taking the form of thick horns made grinding noises as they readjusted their aim.

In that tunnel, the fragments and shock wave from the shells would likely kill all of them no matter who the beetles aimed at. And the beetles showed no sign of taking that into consideration.

“…!!”

The one who received the greatest shock was Fremea Seivelun.

She had once been targeted by an oddly-shaped powered suit operated by the Freshmen. That battle had also used a narrow tunnel as its stage.

An unpleasant sweat quickly covered her entire face.

Strength left her legs and half of her vision seemed to be covered by something like fuzzy static. Fremea was not even aware of the fact that her breathing had grown extremely erratic.

The five rhinoceros beetles continued their approach nevertheless.

Whether it was right or not, that group of weapons would use their cannons to blow away whatever target met the conditions they had been given. Even if Fremea and the others tried to turn tail and run, there was only so much human legs could do. No matter how much they struggled, they could not escape the beetles' cannons. The first wave would blow them all to pieces, leaving behind a horrible scene in which no one would be able to tell which limbs belonged to which person.

That was what should have happened.

But…

"…K-ksh…?"

One of the rhinoceros beetles that had been moving as accurately as a machine let out a strange noise. It seemed some problem had arisen in the movements of the giant wings producing the artificial voice and that had caused an error in the voice conversion.

"What was that?" said Takitsubo Rikou as she blinked a few times.

No, it was not an issue with the hardware.

The source of the problem was in the software signal that produced the artificial voice.

"Rechecking oral order. 'Destroy any and all elements that obstruct our mission.' …Beginning value conversion while breaking order down word by word. Rechecking while searching for changes in meaning based on the word combination."

The beetle's cannon began to sway slightly, unrelated to its targeting information.

The movement resembled a human tilting its head in confusion.

"Focusing on term 'mission'. Requesting help from all accompanying models. More information needed to set objective of autonomous strategy order."

The five rhinoceros beetles all spread their wings at once.

They vibrated those wings at high speed to create human language.

Isn't that obvious?

That was what the other beetles seemed to say in the readiness with which they replied to their malfunctioning friend.

"The objective of the current mission is to defeat Fräulein Kreutune and eliminate the objective behind her actions."

“The objective of the current mission is to eliminate anyone who would obstruct the battle between Academy City’s #1 and #2.”

“The objective of the current mission is to secure the battlefield.”

“The objective of the current mission is to eliminate the recent continuing threat to Academy City by defeating all dangerous elements.”

“The objective of the current mission is to protect the residents of Academy City from all currently anticipated dangerous elements.”

……
……

The rhinoceros beetles stopped moving for a moment.

But they took action shortly thereafter.

The five rhinoceros beetles all rotated at once with enough force to send orange sparks flying from the concrete ground. Then, with their cannon barrels pressed against each other at close range, they unhesitatingly began firing.

Part 15

“Oh?” A woman in a cheap suit and lab coat let out a puzzled voice as she monitored the situation on a laptop. “Ahh, ahh, ahh… I guess their interpretations while converting the oral command were all different.”

After all, the official reason for Kakine Teitoku’s release was so that he could protect the peace of Academy City. If one took that at face value, it was not too surprising if the #2 himself was set as an obstruction to that objective.

“Shit. Is this a form of narrowing down ideas? When you go on a diet or go shopping, you plan it out by bouncing different ideas off each other to strengthen your imagination. And to increase your odds of success. This isn’t enough to say that thing is opposing Kakine Teitoku. But this could still be bad.”

But at the same time, the reflection of her face in the laptop’s screen showed no sign of distress.

Her expression was one of pure enjoyment.

“…This is not good at all.”

Part 16

An odd creaking noise came from Fräulein Kreutune where she lay collapsed on the road. Her upper body had been rotated around three full times and then it had been bent over in an L shape thanks to a shell from the side.

Her body was gradually returning to normal.

She looked like a doll made of rubber or plastic that had been balled up in someone's hand and then let go.

"…! Found you!!" came a sudden voice.

It came from a boy with spiky hair.

"…"

As her body's natural power slowly spun her around, Fräulein Kreutune stared at the spiky-haired boy.

"Gh…bh!?"

That was all it took.

All of the oxygen in the boy's lungs left his mouth and all strength left his body.

He was unable to stop the forward momentum he had built up while running, so the spiky-haired boy slid towards Fräulein Kreutune as he collapsed.

His lips moved.

"…Stop…idiot… This…no time to…doing this…!!"

"?"

A tinge of puzzlement entered Fräulein Kreutune's gaze.

As her body rotated further, she was no longer able to keep the spiky-haired boy in view. That must have irritated her because she forced her upper body around to its normal orientation.

"…Hurry and…run away…"

"Poke poke."

"…The ones…after you…will be here soon…"

"Sniff sniff."

"…And could you do something about this…!?" shouted Kamijou as he swung his arm blindly.

The fingers of that hand touched a car battery that had fallen out of a car that had been knocked on its side. To be more specific, he touched the battery's terminals.

An ominous sparking noise exploded out.

Kamijou's body bent back unnaturally and he convulsed for a few seconds.

But this also eliminated whatever it was that was eating into him from within his body. The day before, Thor had told him a high voltage electric current had destroyed the small particles that caused it.

"Bwah!!"

Suddenly, the spiky-haired boy's eyes opened wide as if he had forgotten how to use the oxygen that filled his lungs. On top of that, the way he had fallen had increased the oozing pain in his side to a much more intense pain. He was unable to stand up, so he simply stared up into the blue sky.

"Dammit…The ones causing a commotion up above have gone off somewhere too. I wanted to help out if I could."

"?"

Fräulein Kreutune looked straight up.

Only the normal scenery was left; the strange #1 and #2 were nowhere to be seen.

"Anyway, let's get out of here. Gremlin, Ollerus…and I guess Academy City, too? Anyway, there are a ton of people after you. If you stay here where a big commotion occurred, they'll find you in no time."

She was still staring up into the blue sky.

As she had been trapped in the windowless building for so very, very long, that must have been a bizarre and strange sight…*but that was not the reason.*

For one thing, Fräulein Kreutune did not possess a system for creating proper emotions. She simply needed time to think.

Finally, she spoke.

"I cannot go."

"Why not? Even if you have some goal of your own, you need to hide at least for now. Do you have any idea how problematic a place this is for you to be?"

"This is not on…that level."

Fräulein Kreutune sat up as she continued to speak.

The motion was stiff and awkward.

It was as if she was resisting something.

It was as if she would charge off somewhere if she relaxed even for a second.

“My thoughts… My decisions… This is not…on that level.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Function,” she said calmly. Or perhaps she would have let out a meaningless scream that drowned out all else if she did not forcibly slow her speech down like that. “I have gained that…function. It is the…same as how you breathe…or blink. I will…eat that girl’s…brain. I have gained a function…that means I must eat it…”

Kamijou heard an odd sound.

It was coming from her body.

She was trembling.

Part 17

Hamazura Shiage used both hands to cover his ears with all his strength.

Even so, the roar within the tunnel was enough to feel like it was tearing apart his eardrums. The sound of the shells would have been loud enough at the best of times, but the close quarters and enclosed environment of the tunnel made it much worse. Given the circumstances, he counted himself lucky that none of his organs were injured.

“What the hell, what the hell, what the hell, what the hell!? If they were gonna start fighting each other, couldn’t they have done it before approaching us!? What are they trying to do!?”

“Nyah… I feel dizzy…”

The five rhinoceros beetles were not firing at Hamazura and the others.

Hamazura was not sure if those monsters were living creatures or just weapons, but they had pressed their cannon barrels against each other as if creating a ring and then unhesitatingly begun firing repeatedly at each other at point blank range.

While holding her own ears just like Hamazura was, Yoshikawa Kikyou grimaced and said, “It looks like their friend/foe identification and

destruction priority order have been thrown out of order thanks to a difference in interpretation over their orders. But how?"

The explosive noises continued.

One of the white rhinoceros beetles that must have weighed several tons was torn from the ground and blown in a large parabolic arc. It flipped upside down so the area of armor meant to store its wings was pressed up against the concrete and subway track.

"Wah!!"

"Hamazura, move back," said Takitsubo.

Immediately after he was pulled backwards by a surprisingly strong tug on his clothes, the upside-down beetle slid into the spot he had been standing in.

Either their "opinions" had coincided or they were simply going to destroy the enemy they could because the other four beetles all aimed at the single upside-down beetle.

As the rhinoceros beetle's six legs wriggled around, it forcibly vibrated the wings trapped between itself and the ground to create an artificial voice that could reach Hamazura and the others who were nearby.

"…What was I trying to do?" it asked.

"How the hell should I know!? Don't come on out here if you're just going to get confused!!"

"I suppose so. I agree that this is something I should decide for myself."

While still on its back, the beetle beat its thin wings against the ground to rotate around. Using that method, it accurately aimed its thick horn. Its target was Last Order who stood behind Hamazura.

"Nyah!!"

Fremea immediately moved forward to cover Last Order who was clinging to Yoshikawa's leg.

But…

The shell never came.

While still on its back, the rhinoceros beetle vibrated its thin wings to create a voice once more.

"Activating order wizard. Validity of oral order 'destroy any and all elements that obstruct our mission' in question. No threat detected in

designated individuals. Continuation risks leading to destruction of entire order list."

"Wh-what? What do you mean by that?"

"I am saying I will save you in order to protect my order list from a fatal contradiction."

The other four beetles took action.

Without producing any flames or smoke, shells bigger around than an arm were fired from the tip of the barrel that looked like a thick horn.

Immediately afterwards, the beetle that had been lying upside down near Hamazura and the others twisted itself around and fired from that position. One of the pillars supporting the subway tunnel was smashed to pieces and a shower of fragments fell in the path of the shells fired by the other four beetles, altering their trajectory.

At the same time, the one rhinoceros beetle used the recoil of firing that shell to leap over Hamazura and the others' heads, rotate halfway in midair, and land with its six legs clawing at the concrete ground.

"Protecting system and setting up new position from a different angle. Checking to confirm no contradictions were produced by battling fellow beetles." Its giant thin wings vibrated, producing an artificial voice. "Rhinoceros Beetle 05 will now protect you *in order to optimize the oral order from Kakine Teitoku.*"

With a sound like a cathode ray tube, the color of Rhinoceros Beetle 05's eyes changed from green to red.

It changed from a symbol of safety to the representative color of warnings.

It may have been nothing more than a bug created when it converted the oral order given by a human into a numerical order script.

It may have been a conversion error wanted by neither Kakine Teitoku nor the woman known as a Kihara.

But…

Even if it came from a mistake, some form of "direction" had appeared within Rhinoceros Beetle 05.

Between the Lines 4

Now then.

A lot has been said about the woman known as Fräulein Kreutune, but who knows if any of it is true or not.

It may be true. It may not.

After all, the source of this information is documents from hundreds of years ago.

History can become twisted by the simplest of things.

But at the same time, things that were thought to be nonsense for the longest time can be found to have a scientific basis hundreds of years later.

What is true?

What is false?

Are the things thought to be true actually false?

Are the things thought to be false actually true?

The woman known as Fräulein Kreutune definitely did exist.

And her abnormality has been demonstrated.

So what deserves the most attention? If all of the documents on her and all the data and values obtained about her are compared, which parts will stand out as odd?

This is the turning point.

The monster's mouth has only just opened.

Chapter 6: Monster, Monster, Monster, Monster. *All_Bad_Stars.*

Part 1

The cityscape of Academy City was arranged to look tidy. Whether they were from 10 years ago, 5 years ago, the present, 5 years in the future, or 10 years in the future, people of any era would likely have a refreshingly neat impression of the city's look. And that meant buildings had to be rebuilt frequently.

After all, the city was surrounded by a wall and had a limited surface area to build on.

Buildings were rebuilt to use the land more efficiently as well as simply to perform tests of the latest technology.

Of course, various types of technology were used to keep anyone from feeling that the city was "under construction" or "being prepared". The people's impression of the cityscape was simply that it was "nicely arranged" or "neat and tidy".

Even so, buildings that were under construction were quite common.

As were abandoned buildings with all people and equipment removed to prepare for construction.

A few official members of Gremlin were currently in a room of one such abandoned building in District 7.

Marian Slingeneyer was hiding within that simple rectangular space that lacked even any carpet or wallpaper. She had originally had her headquarters in a District 7 hotel, but that hiding place had been revealed to the public on an Anti-Skill wanted poster, so she had moved to the abandoned building to prevent any surprise attacks by her powerful enemies such as Ollerus.

In reality, Kamijou Touma and the Lightning God Thor had used a few tricks to make that happen, but Marian was not aware of this. She had no idea that she was not actually wanted by Anti-Skill or that the wanted poster she saw had been created by Kamijou and Thor.

"…!!"

Her head shot up as if it had been struck.

She had heard an explosive noise.

It was a sound too deep to be a gunshot that she felt reverberating deep in her gut more than she heard it with her ears. It was not the sound of an unfortunate traffic accident or a building being demolished. It was a characteristic roar that that was oozing with killer intent all the way down to the planning stage.

It was more than enough to put her on guard.

She looked out a window that had no glass inside.

Instead of white or black smoke, a long, thin stream of sand-colored dust stretched up towards the sky. It was not far away. It was only about 500 to 700 meters away.

Marian stuck a hand into the side of her overalls and pulled out a saw made of gold.

And she smiled.

This was the smile of one who knew the taste of blood.

“Okay, now who was that!? Ollerus’s group? Someone from Academy City? Or maybe we’ll get lucky and it was Fräulein Kreutune herself. At any rate, this is no time to be sitting around!!”

In response, the girl(?) in the shape of a black drum named Mjölnir noisily shook in one corner of the room.

And Thor gritted his teeth so no one could see while holding a convenience store bag full of the block-shaped handheld food and mineral water he had been tasked with purchasing.

(They’re making more annoyingly noticeable actions.)

Thor (and Kamijou Touma) had played a trick on Marian in their attempt to keep the monsters of Ollerus’s group and the monsters of Gremlin from running across each other. That way they could prevent the enormous damage the city would suffer if those two sides clashed.

Unlike Kamijou who could only negate supernatural powers, it was obvious nothing good could come from having two ridiculously enormous powers clash.

(And after we went to so much effort to fake that wanted poster to make her afraid she would be tracked by Ollerus’s group.)

The Lightning God Thor was in charge of direct combat, Marian Slingeneyer provided support from behind the scenes with equipment and the like, and Mjölnir was a *generator* that was overly attached to Marian.

If they sensed a moderate threat, the proper course of action would be for Marian and Mjölnir to stay in the hideout while Thor headed out to gather information or engage the enemy in combat.

That method had succeeded so far.

But…

“No matter how elaborate a hideout you create, it’s no good if they find it. Thor, Mjölnir. You two make a scene while *I gather some people to use as materials!*”

A cornered rat will bite a cat.

Marian was being cautious to avoid having to fight Ollerus’s group, Academy City, or even both at the same time, but that was also why she felt the need to quickly take action if it was needed.

He who attacks first wins.

The very fact that she saw their enemies as formidable meant she felt a strong desire to use overwhelming violence rather than to wait and go with the flow.

The black drum shook back and forth.

That girl(?) was always in support of Marian. If nothing was done, she would get worked up along with Marian Slingeneyer and cause an explosion.

Thor was the only one who could oppose Marian’s idea.

But he was also the one who had tricked her. If he tried to change the flow of events, it could considerably increase the risk of her suspecting him. It did not matter if she had no basis for suspicion. It was completely possible actions taken on unfounded suspicions could suddenly drive Thor into checkmate.

(This isn’t how I like doing things.)

“Hey, Marian. Who do you think it is?”

“I dunno. The worst possibility is Ollerus’s group, but the other options are plenty dangerous too. It’s possible that unknown monster known as Fräulein Kreutune has noticed what we are doing and has come to attack us in order to prevent us from pursuing her.”

“If this is someone trying to attack us, they wouldn’t cause a commotion before setting foot in this room.”

“Maybe their information isn’t very detailed, so they’re doing this to search us out.”

“In that case, reacting is playing right into their hands. Let’s wait for them to move on and then take a preemptive strike on their exposed backs. That would be best. I’m in charge of direct combat, so listen to what I say. The first strike is important. Are you the attacker or the defender? Are you the champion or the challenger? Your entire position in the battle can change.”

“Come on now, Thor-chan.” Said Marian while spinning her gold saw around. “*That’s exactly why we need to move now.* If we want to start off with the upper hand, the last thing we want to do is stay huddled up here. Even if their information is lacking in detail, they will be gathering more information as time goes on. Just because we’re standing still here doesn’t mean the enemy is going to wait around for us. These opponents are bad enough already. We need to crush them before they have a chance to level up.”

The drum made a clattering noise as it shook.

The girl(?) was not agreeing or disagreeing; she was simply supporting Marian.

Thor glanced over at the dust outside the window.

“Academy City has a lot of different problems. This might have nothing to do with us.”

“We’ll see whether it does or not when we go check.”

“And what if going to check reveals your location? This could fill in the details our enemies are lacking.”

Marian said nothing more.

With a snap of the wrist she was using to spin the saw, the tone of the whooshing it made as it sliced through the air suddenly rose. It had a similar nuance to snapping her fingers or whistling. Naturally, it was Mjölnir who responded.

“Thor, they have no information on you. I have already been tainted since information has gotten out on me, so I will head out. If you still want to talk about being cautious, go find a new hideout for us.”

Thor let out a sigh.

His strategy to stop her with words had failed. The decoy threat from the previous stage of his plan may have affected her too much.

“Understood.”

Thor simply gave an honest response.

He had given up.

And then…

He unhesitatingly swung his leg up from behind and kicked Marian Slingeneyer in the side of the head.

The way she collapsed did not look like a human action.

It looked like a stick falling over after being stood on end. It was clear as day that the powerful strike had knocked Marian out cold.

It had been as high a kick as he could manage.

The strike had been pulled off so skillfully that it almost looked like time had stopped for an instant.

And of course, Mjölnir would not overlook that act of violence.

"…!!"

The drum-shaped girl(?) did not use words.

Its dark glittering surface emitted bluish-white sparks.

Mjölnir's body hid energy great enough to vaporize one third of a mobile fortress the size of a city.

But…

"You idiot!! *If you go nuts here, you'll put Marian in danger!*" shouted Thor to hold back Mjölnir's actions with the force of his words.

The drum's movements stopped as if a wedge had been driven into its gears.

"You know why Ollerus's group is targeting Fräulein Kreutune, right? As the specimen for a holistic esper, she is the final piece Othinus needs to prepare Gungnir. …It is only natural for someone wanting to interfere with Othinus's plan to try to eliminate Fräulein Kreutune."

Something floated up to the surface of the drum.

They were lips.

And it was not just one pair. As if to represent the eruption of her anger, those organs for emitting words appeared one after another. It looked like the surface of boiling water.

"…And?" was her only response.

No matter how logical his answer was, nothing but ash would be left in the next instant if she did not accept it.

“Do you still not get it?” Thor spoke slowly in response to that unspoken announcement. “The enemy’s ultimate objective is to stop Gungnir from being completed. If they can accomplish that, nothing else matters to them. The loss of a single piece will cause Othinus’s plan to fail. …In that case, they do not need to kill Fräulein Kreutune. If they kill the pure Dvergr who is the sole person able to produce the weapons of the gods, *they still get what they want.*”

The black drum fell silent for a moment.

But its countless lips did not disappear.

While searching for the proper words, the girl(?) known as Mjölnir said, “Are you saying Ollerus’s group was planning that from the beginning? Impossible. Even if they knew Gremlin was taking action, they would have had no idea what specific members would be heading here.”

“So what? An ally of justice like that Ollerus-chan would want to avoid killing some unrelated person like Fräulein Kreutune just to stop Othinus’s plan. He would find it easier to eliminate someone guilty of past crimes like Marian Slingeneyer.”

“But…!”

“Their initial plan may have been to kill Fräulein Kreutune. They may have prepared a means of killing that monster that no one seems able to kill.” Thor held up his index finger to keep Mjölnir from speaking. “*But they saw Marian Slingeneyer’s wanted poster. They know she was last seen in that District 7 hotel.*”

That was of course false information Thor and Kamijou Touma had prepared, so he had no idea if Ollerus and the others had actually seen it.

“Don’t you think they might have changed their plans when they saw that? Just because they have a theoretical means of killing Fräulein Kreutune does not mean it will actually work. They’ve never tested their method. But Marian is a normal human they know they can kill. If you compare the two, even a monkey can tell which would be the easier target and which they would have better odds against.”

“…”

“We heard an explosion. Dust was blown up into the air. Do you really think the enemy is just waiting around for us to head out and attack them? *Do you really think the situation is that simple?* The explosion and the dust may be separate events. We might get sniped from afar if we carelessly head out. Do you really think we should let Marian head out there with her blood rushing to her head? Well?”

For a while, Mjölnir remained silent.

Finally, the countless lips visible on the drum's surface disappeared as if sinking below the surface of some water.

"We need to look into just how much information on Marian Ollerus's group has and what kind of trap they have set up. I'll handle that. You make preparations so Marian can escape if the time comes."

The drum shook noisily back and forth.

Thor assumed she was asking for a more concrete suggestion, so he added, "If you feel things are getting dangerous, roast the entire city block. With a thousand or ten thousand corpses that barely look human anymore, it will take time to ID all of them. Even if someone has definite information that Marian is here, that should keep them off your trail."

The essence of a lie was to let it fulfill its role without fearing the risk the information held.

The instant you held back, you would be exposed.

Part 2

During the large scale cultural festival known as the Ichihanaransai, a large number of people were constantly moving around. This naturally led to a great rise in the number of lost children.

The standard Anti-Skill deployment was not enough to deal with all the various troubles, both large and small, so the student-led Judgment was sent to work out in the city at large.

And so, Uiharu Kazari was surrounded by elementary school students on a District 7 road. She was a Judgment member in her first year of middle school who had so many decorative flowers in her hair that her head looked like a vase full of flowers.

As the children tugged on her stereotypical sailor uniform, they all spoke to her.

"C'mon, do it. Say, 'this is Judgment'!!"

"Say it!"

"It's famous."

"Yeah, yeah."

“Ah wah wah wah wah wah,” said Uiharu as she was overwhelmed by the flood of words coming from all around her.

However, the surrounding children did not seem to care.

“U-umm, that is not actually a standard thing for Judgment. In fact, Shirai-san often gets in trouble for that because we cannot have people thinking Judgment is usually so violent…”

“C’mon, just do it! And do the teleport too!!”

“Eh? Isn’t it scary suddenly disappearing and reappearing somewhere else? What if you ended up in some strange place?”

“I know how that works. You travel through something like a tunnel that you call a wormhole.”

“But what makes up that tunnel? How long is the tunnel???”

“Eee!” Uiharu let out a pathetic scream.

(I think Shirai-san’s ability converts the perceived three dimensional space into strict 11 dimensional space and then moves a different axis instead of using wormholes, but the detailed theory behind it is on a university graduate student level. Please don’t look to a completely normal middle school student for an intelligent answer about it…)

On the other sidewalk across the road, Aogami Pierce was on his way to replenish the industrial flour used for their takoyaki stand. When he saw that keeper of the peace surrounded by little girls, he silently clenched his fist.

“Judgment…!!!!!!”

A look appeared on Aogami Pierce’s face like a genius composer who had been struck by a sudden revelation, but then someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind.

He turned around to find a high school girl with large breasts and glasses as well as a middle school girl with a flat chest and twintails.

Both of them had a certain characteristic armband on their right shoulder.

“Excuse me, we are from Judgment. …Could we speak with you for a moment?”

“Konori-senpai, can’t we just throw him in a cell? I don’t know if it’s due to the event, but all the small cases and mysterious reports are needlessly

driving down our efficiency. …Honestly, why are people saying giant rhinoceros beetles are rampaging around?"

"You can't just take your frustrations out on him. That explosive noise and smoke were probably just some school going too far trying to attract guests. Oh, we need to check your belongings, so if you could just head over to the corner here…"

"Judgment…" he muttered once more.

This was the 43rd time Aogami Pierce had been questioned by the authorities that year, but it looked like the experience would be quite moe this time.

Part 3

In a District 7 subway tunnel, the white rhinoceros beetle weapons created from Kakine Teitoku's Dark Matter were glaring at each other and aiming their cannons at each other.

They fired without hesitation.

They fired again and again.

Four of them acted as pursuers. The remaining one was the traitor that was protecting Hamazura, Fremea, and the others. Not only did the pursuers outnumber the lone beetle, but they only needed to kill the humans within the tunnel. It did not matter if Rhinoceros Beetle 05 resisted or not; the pursuers could crush their targets' organs by filling the tunnel with the shockwaves of their blasts.

But…

The same could be said for Rhinoceros Beetle 05's side.

They did not need to defeat the other four beetles. Rhinoceros Beetle 05's primary objective was to allow Hamazura Shiage, Takitsubo Rikou, Yoshikawa Kikyou, Last Order, and Fremea Seivelun to escape the tunnel and distance them from the threat to their lives.

And so…

"Brace for impact," said Rhinoceros Beetle 05.

A simultaneous attack was carried out by the four beetles that had decided killing Last Order and those around her was the best method to carry out their objective of robbing Fräulein Kreutune of the reason behind her actions. They were not aiming for direct hits. Instead, they were firing the

shells at the ground just in front of their target to fill every nook and cranny of the tunnel with a shockwave wall.

Normally thinking, this was not something a flesh-and-blood human could withstand.

Even if Rhinoceros Beetle 05 acted as a shield for Hamazura and the others, the shockwave would fill the entire area to swallow them up and crush their organs from within.

But…

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 vibrated its giant thin wings at high speed to create an artificial voice. It was not trying to speak. The vibration it scattered through the air struck the coming shockwave *and forcibly altered its direction.*

"What…did they mess up? My ears don't hurt."

"I sent a wave of my own towards their wave. It cannot be seen so it may be difficult to understand, but a shockwave can easily be influenced like a billiards ball using other waves or obstacles."

Several hurdles had to be overcome before that theory could actually be pulled off.

The beetle had to accurately repel or turn aside the shockwave and the fragments of the shell and ground created in the explosion to keep them away from those it wished to protect.

"That is his technique, says Misaka as Misaka comments."

"Are you talking about Accelerator?" asked Yoshikawa.

"I used a theoretical routine based on our potential enemy's actions, but I doubt I would be able to achieve his level. Our shells are unsuited to killing a target using the secondary effects such as the shockwave."

"?"

"Because my body is made entirely out of Dark Matter, I have no means of creating the gunpowder needed to fire or detonate a shell. A spring system is used to fire the shells. It is said that in the past, a 'strange' weapon reinforced with the power of Dark Matter competed for market share with a shoulder-fired rocket launcher. The shells detonated by breaking the hardened outer coating with sponge springs, so their acoustic effect was only 36% to 50% that of the normal shell. I conclude that is the reason my evasive actions have been successful. …Meanwhile, that #1 would likely have no problem handling a nuclear weapon." Rhinoceros Beetle 05 continued to use its giant wings to produce sound waves outside of the audible range to repel the shockwaves while using any gaps to produce its

artificial voice. “There is a worker’s exit 15 meters behind us. On my signal, I will create a wall by making the ceiling collapse and you will run for the exit.”

The beetle had no intention of defeating their opponents.

For one thing, all of the rhinoceros beetles were strange weapons created by Kakine Teitoku’s Dark Matter. They had no “core” or “weak point” to speak of and they would automatically heal any part that was destroyed. The one exception was Rhinoceros Beetle 05 who had made an “interpretation” that opposed the will of Kakine himself.

Hamazura turned around to check on the location of the small metal door.

Sparks flew and the door burst open. Most likely, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had skillfully turned aside the shockwave of the enemies’ shells to break the lock.

“Now,” said the beetle.

“O-okay!”

It began with an obvious explosive noise.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05’s cannon barrel moved and fired a shell at the ceiling. The ceiling collapsed around the other four beetles.

“Hamazura, run!” shouted Takitsubo.

While practically carrying Fremea, Hamazura ran through the ominously shaking tunnel. Last Order was being pulled along while hand in hand with Yoshikawa. Each time Rhinoceros Beetle 05 fired again to hold the other beetles in check, the tough tunnel ground seemed to sway like a ship in a storm.

Takitsubo charged through the worker’s door first, Fremea came next as Hamazura pushed her along, and Yoshikawa and Last Order made it last. Takitsubo grabbed Last Order’s other hand to help Yoshikawa pull her through the door.

Once it saw all of them had evacuated, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 moved backwards to slam into the worker’s door.

But the door was too small.

It slammed into the door with enough force to dent the wall around it, but it was unable to squeeze through the narrow exit.

Hamazura’s eyes opened wide.

“What are you doing!?”

“Do not worry. This is part of my plan.” With its back end slightly crushed, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 sat in the doorway like a giant stone blocking the way as it moved its thin wings to produce an artificial voice “Since I have left Kakine Teitoku’s control, I can no longer renew my Dark Matter. In the near future, I will break apart. Also, our shells are unable to destroy fellow beetles. The only way to escape from these enemies that can regenerate infinitely is to block their path in some way.”

(This bastard.)

Hamazura almost yelled his comment out loud.

(For nothing but a weapon, he’s got a lot of nerve to lie and put on a show of being tough.)

“Hurry up! Your shells are powerful enough to destroy this wall, right!?” he shouted instead.

“That would allow the enemy beetles to continue pursuit. Also, if I can destroy it, so can they. They will soon free themselves of the wreckage. I have determined something more is needed to act as the ‘wall’ that blocks their way.”

“…Dammit.”

“Good luck. I will make sure to carry out my primary objective. Take care.”

“God dammit!!!!!!”

Just as Hamazura let out that curse, the entire area shook ominously. The enemy rhinoceros beetles had blown away the pile of rubble. They now began firing on their fellow weapon that was unable to evade if it was to block their path.

It had no escape.

It would never end.

Using its ability to regenerate to a certain extent even while outside of the #2’s control, it could only continue the tragic shootout without end like a zombie even as its body was crushed further and further.

The joint of the building materials must have been shaken because a powder sprinkled down from the ceiling.

Yoshikawa pointed towards the staircase up and out of the subway tunnel with her chin.

“We have no idea how long this will stop them. We need to head to the surface.”

“But…!!” started Hamazura, but Takitsubo grabbed his hand.

In a quiet but clear voice, she said, “Let’s go. It cannot escape even if we stay behind.”

Hamazura gritted his teeth.

But it was true they would eventually be killed if they stuck around.

While only half able to brush aside his reluctance, Hamazura ran up the narrow worker’s staircase. Takitsubo and Yoshikawa followed him. At the top of the metal staircase was a door. It was locked, but it was only meant to keep people out. In other words, they could easily unlock it from the inside. After doing so, they charged outside.

Yoshikawa looked up into the sky while holding a hand up to cover the bright light of the sun.

“It looks like Accelerator has moved elsewhere.”

“But that doesn’t mean we’re safe. Dammit, we need to call Mugino or Kinuhata and…”

Hamazura trailed off.

Takitsubo in her pink track suit was looking around with a puzzled expression.

After looking in the direction she was looking, Hamazura finally realized something.

“Wait…where did Fremea go!?”

“It looks like Last Order…is gone too.”

In that moment, the white Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was not even attempting to move from its spot blocking the door in the subway tunnel even while receiving a fierce bombardment from the other beetles. Errors were constantly popping up over the discrepancy with the theoretical ideal evasive and tactical actions, but it forced all of that down and remained on the course of protecting the humans.

It was still firing shells to hold the other beetles at bay and vibrating its thin wings to interfere with the vectors of the shockwaves filling the tunnel.

But it was not enough.

The humans hiding behind it were a much smaller target to protect than the entire wall around the door that needed to remain intact to prevent the

fleeing humans from being buried. And of course, the wider the area it had to protect, the harder it was to do so.

Several cracks had appeared on its smooth white surface.

It did not feel pain like a living being.

It was less concerned about the destruction of its own body by the relentless bombardment than it was about receiving too much damage to recover from in time and allowing the other beetles past. It did not want to make any predictive calculations concerning the scene of being unable to move and only able to watch as the enemy beetles headed past and brought danger back to the humans who had supposedly escaped.

It could not avoid being overwhelmed.

As the damage piled up, it quickly overcame the speed at which it could be regenerated. Whether Rhinoceros Beetle 05 liked it or not, it would eventually be left unable to function and the wall behind it would be destroyed.

But the humans would have fled far away by that time.

The threat of the other beetles would not reach them.

The beetle could not win and no amount of wearing down the enemy beetles could change that.

Any normal calculations would leave only the word “impossible” to describe the situation, but Rhinoceros Beetle 05 gave its all to protect that door.

The shells continued to fly.

Cracks ran through its surface around its red glowing eyes.

It checked the time.

It decided it had bought enough time. The humans would have arrived at the surface by then.

It had carried out its mission.

It recognized this fact.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 also recognized that its body would be completely crushed after receiving 5 or 6 more shells, but it dug its 6 legs into the concrete ground to maintain its defensive position.

But…

“Nyah, nyah!! In the first place, we won’t let you stay behind!!”

“You need to run too, says Misaka as Misaka calls out to you!!”

When the white Rhinoceros Beetle 05 heard those voices, it felt like its body had suddenly shrunk down in size. An organic life form with a normal construction of muscles and internal organs would likely express it as feeling like one’s heart was being squeezed.

It could only buy a short amount of time.

Once the other beetles wore Rhinoceros Beetle 05 down to the point they could make it past, those girls would be torn apart right away.

(This is not over yet!!)

It did not take long for the beetle to make up its mind.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 moved its body slightly away from the door. It created enough of a gap for the small children to come back into the tunnel.

“This way!!” it shouted. “We need to escape. Please hurry!!”

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 ignored the girls who began trying to climb on top of its body for some reason and began vibrating its large thin wings at a set amplitude.

As soon as it did, Last Order and Fremea’s bodies began floating in midair.

“Nyawah!? In the first place, this is like a spacewalk!!”

“Are you making us float with the vibration? says Misaka as Misaka asks for confirmation.”

“The high frequency waves outside of the audible range are causing resonant vibrations in the extra space of the material of your clothes. It may be more similar to the way a flying fish glides through the air by beating its tail fin against the water surface than it is how a bird or insect flies using its wings.”

The girls may have not completely understood the situation because they let out screams of delight as they floated. Meanwhile, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 took action for a retreat.

While the other beetles continued their close range bombardment, it moved backwards deeper into the tunnel.

Naturally, the enemy beetles immediately reacted.

They could continue their bombardment even at a fair distance. They had likely determined that blowing away the traitor and sending it rolling through the tunnel would be enough to crush the targets floating above it.

But they never actually fired the shells to carry out this plan.

Based on the systematic vibrations they felt in the tips of their six legs, they immediately took evasive action.

In other words, they had determined that a train was likely approaching.

"…?"

But even after 30 seconds had passed, the light of a train did not appear.

And then another possibility finally floated up in their minds.

The fleeing traitor could be travelling while striking the subway track in a pattern identical to the vibration of a train.

After moving backwards through the tunnel at tremendous speed for a certain distance, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 decided it had made it far enough away. While still remaining wary of the darkness, it turned 180 degrees and began moving at full speed in the same direction as before.

And then a change occurred to the back of the beetle.

The children floating above it were doing something.

To be specific, they had begun drawing something with a pen on the surface of the opened armor plate.

"Nyah, nyah. In the first place, there are a lot of you, so things will get confusing if we don't give you some kind of mark."

"What is that? asks Misaka as Misaka points at your scribbling."

"This is the mark of the Hamazura Brigade!!"

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 appreciated the sentiment but wished they would at least use something other than a permanent marker.

Part 4

Academy City had no giant radio towers that acted as landmarks. From the standpoint of protecting their technological information, a radio tower that spread its signal too widely was actually a problem.

But they were sometimes constructed as experiments of construction technology even if they were not needed.

A certain 50 meter metal tower that could only be called a miniature radio tower almost seemed buried by the high-rise buildings around it. And a boy was leaning up against a piece of its thick metal framework.

He was Kakine Teitoku.

"…That did not go as well as planned. I never thought he would take out 300 of the me-shaped ones in only 15 minutes. Even if they can't be killed, it looks like he can still keep them from moving by smashing their bodies open or balling them up."

No hint of bitterness could be found in his tone as he muttered solely for his own benefit.

In the battle between the #1 and #2, direct damage was not viewed with much importance.

Kakine Teitoku's "creation" could replace anything destroyed with a newly created one.

Accelerator's "destruction" could intercept any attack with his vector transformation.

What mattered most to those two was not the physical phenomena seen on the surface. It was the calculation patterns, thought patterns, and Personal Realities at the base of their powers. Coming up with a detailed analysis of what it was that made the two of them special was what would provide them with victory.

In their previous battle, Kakine had used his Dark Matter which does not exist in this world to reflect sunlight and shockwaves to create attacks that possessed vectors that could never exist on the earth.

The first condition for Kakine was finding a way to break through Accelerator's wall of reflection.

If one observed the battle while focusing on that side of things, one would finally see the true path the battle had taken.

"When it comes to your attack patterns and the logic of your reflection, those 300 you destroyed are like playing a game of concentration. Even failed attempts help you succeed the next time as long as you memorize the pattern and numbers on the cards. And eventually you will have a complete view."

Something white and 5 meters long flew above Kakine's head.

The object cutting through the sky while slipping through the gaps in the framework of the experimental miniature radio tower was a giant dragonfly made of Dark Matter that was used for reconnaissance.

Looking like he was watching a paper airplane he had made fly away, Kakine muttered, "But this could always come to a pathetic end where you collapse from your battery dying before that happens."

"…is probably what he's thinking," muttered Accelerator underneath a giant overpass.

He was on top of the complex metal framework that reinforced the overpass. He sat on one piece of the framework with his back leaning up against an intersecting piece of the framework. He was lightly touching the switch for the choker-style electrode on his neck.

The choker-style electrode's battery would only last for 30 minutes.

He had already used half of that.

Kakine Teitoku only had to avoid a quick resolution and continue his attacks to hold Accelerator in check and Accelerator would be driven into a fatal situation. A certain situation had led to Accelerator's brain being severely injured, so he could not use his power of the strongest or even stand on his own two feet or understand human language without receiving calculation support from the Misaka Network via his choker.

But…

(That is not an absolute limit. It's just that the battery is only able to hold that much power. In that case…)

The overpass seemed to have water pipes and power cables running through it and a thick cable ran right next to Accelerator. He glanced across the surface of the cable to check on the amperage and voltage running through it and then unhesitatingly removed the outer covering of the cable with his bare hands.

He was going to recharge.

The concept was simple enough, but he of course could not use the high voltage current running through the thick power cable as is. On his way to that overpass, Accelerator had gathered a few metal plates, wires, and the like. By assembling them, he had created a makeshift transformer.

If his calculations were off even by the slightest amount, not only would the choker-style electrode burst into flames, his fingers operating the transformer could even be blown off.

Yet he did not hesitate.

He quickly attached the transformer to the power cable and used a small cord to supply power to his electrode's battery.

(I can't sit here recharging for very long. I'll probably only get maybe a dozen seconds recharged.)

To be blunt, he recognized he was at the disadvantage.

He accepted that fact.

And after accepting it, he continued on.

(*But if he is convinced I'll run out of gas after another 15 minutes*, all I need is a few extra seconds. If I add an additional attack during that extra time, I can tear him apart.)

He had already made the preparations he needed for that.

The monster known as Academy City's #1 had not consumed half of his battery's power for nothing.

He saw the #2's power as warranting the use of half the battery.

(Now then. Those attacks I intentionally used nonsense calculation patterns for should have reached him by now. If he's calculated out an optimum answer based on that, I'll be able to defeat that asshole without needing this extra battery time.)

"…is probably what he's thinking," muttered Kakine Teitoku as he leaned up against the framework at the center of the radio tower.

(Since that battery is his bottleneck, he'll want to secure some extra power and he knows the vulnerabilities of his reflection better than anyone. He isn't going to provide an opening so easily. But some idiosyncrasies will always remain. There is something real hidden among all the decoy information.)

Once he learned the white dragonflies soaring through the sky could not find the target, Kakine Teitoku focused his search on areas that could not be seen from the sky.

(The biggest danger is those wings that leave the category of logic altogether. Those can carry out attacks that overcome Dark Matter's strength. He would be quite a threat if he could bring them out at will.)

But he doubted it was that easy.

(I don't have enough data on them because they have appeared so infrequently, but it is always when his emotions are at an extreme high or low that they appear. It does not matter if the emotions are positive or negative. Plus the wings never stay for long. …In other words, I just need to hold him in check. That's all. I don't know what those wings consume, but just like with his other powers, they will disappear on their own if I buy enough time.)

He had had as much time to think as he could ever want.

During the time almost all of his organs had been crushed and replaced with artificial ones and while he had been used by some piece of shit or another to manufacture weapons, he had truly had as much time as he could want.

(The #1 is fiercely powerful but only in certain areas. An opening will surely show itself. It is a matter of timing…of finding the peaks and the valleys. Meanwhile, my creation ability is perfectly stable. This battle will be decided when he falls down into one of his own valleys. All I have to do is continue doing what I am doing.)

"…is probably what he's thinking."

"…is probably what he's thinking."

In two different parts of the city, two different monsters muttered those words. They continued thinking on and on as they worked to grow closer and closer to truly attacking their opponent.

It is often said that a fight was over before the fists ever began to fly. These two had already shown themselves to be monsters in that early stage.

The #1 stopped recharging his battery with the power cable and calmly left the overpass using his modern cane.

The #2 unhesitatingly jumped down from the radio tower when he determined surveillance from above was of no use.

They headed to the next exchange.

To their next move.

"This will decide the outcome."

"This will decide the outcome."

Their voices overlapped as if it had been rehearsed.

They muttered those words in unison as they showed each other their backs from afar.

The time would soon arrive.

Part 5

"…Function?" said Kamijou with a puzzled look.

While almost making a creaking noise as she trembled, Fräulein Kreutune gave a slight nod with her long hair still scattered about on the road. Her eyes were writhing irregularly as if following something that was not there.

"A living creature that stands on two legs will view standing on two legs as natural. *But is it really?* If a baby that crawls on all fours is raised without being taught anything by anyone, would it ever think to stand up on its two unsteady legs?"

"…"

Kamijou knew what she was trying to say.

A baby was a living creature that crawled on all fours. It was a living creature that saw that as natural. What led to them standing on two legs was either being taught to stand with their parents' help or watching the adults who lived while standing on two legs. Either way, they changed methods by "learning" in one way or another. They obtained a way of life where they stood on two legs thanks to external stimuli.

And once a living creature learned to live while standing on two legs, it would never go back to crawling on all fours. Even if living while crawling on all fours would be possible, it would never move around on all fours. Once it had obtained the function to stand on two legs, it would learn just how convenient it is.

So…

What if…

"Not even I know when this function came to me," whispered Fräulein Kreutune. Even as she spoke, her strangely hot breaths continued. "But for whatever reason, I have obtained it. *I have obtained the function to gather information by eating a human brain.* And now that I have obtained it, the point of reference for my actions has been overwritten to center on that function. So…I…"

It was not an issue of whether she wanted to or not.

It was just like how a living creature that gained lungs to live on land could no longer return to the ocean.

It was just like how a living creature that gained wings to fly through the sky could no longer run across the land.

To Fräulein Kreutune, not eating brains was like not breathing, walking on your hands, and never blinking again. No matter what she did, she would suffer. And the only escape was to take that "natural" action.

"…"

Kamijou glanced down at his right hand.

If her condition had gone awry because of this unneeded function, he wondered if he could destroy that function with the power of this right hand.

But…

(That would be like performing delicate surgery. Can I really do that? Not to mention that I have no idea what makes Fräulein Kreutune herself run. What if she was completely destroyed as a whole the instant I touched her?)

"The function…is already taking effect," she said while her teeth chattered. "They said I was their friend…but I cannot stop it. Why? Why did I have to gain the function to eat that girl's brain?"

"Wait a second. So it isn't that any human will do?"

"…Gh…gh…"

Fräulein Kreutune's head tilted horizontally. Her long silver hair fell down to cover her face. Kamijou could no longer see her expression.

Her body swayed.

She slowly stood up with an unsteady stance that resembled grass blowing in the wind.

"…Wait," called out Kamijou, but she did not respond. "Where are you going? Wait, listen to me! When you say 'that girl', who do you-…!?"

Kamijou trailed off because the taste of iron suddenly filled his mouth.

"Gh…bh!?"

His body faltered.

He collapsed.

Fräulein Kreutune had not done anything. The scorching pain was centered on his right side. Kamijou had escaped the ICU as soon as his emergency surgery was complete. He had known his wound could reopen at any time.

He could see Fräulein Kreutune's legs moving away as his viewpoint made the world appear to be on its side.

A slight trembling spread from his spine to his fingertips and he was not even able to stretch out his arm.

His mouth flapped open and closed, but no words came out.

(…Was I wrong?)

Fräulein Kreutune had said her function to eat human brains had come to her very recently.

Had it been leaving the windowless building that had caused it?

Kamijou and Thor had attempted to destroy the building's armor, but it had been Fräulein Kreutune who had actually destroyed it from within. In that case, it was not Kamijou who had directly caused her to escape.

But…

Why had Fräulein Kreutune headed outside with that timing? Had it truly been nothing but a coincidence? Or had Kamijou and Thor's actions unintentionally pulled the trigger for her actions?

If that was the case…

(Was I somehow wrong to even try to save her in the first place?)

He heard a quiet scraping noise.

It was the sound of his powerless, trembling fingertips scraping against the asphalt.

As the flavor of iron continued to fill his mouth, Kamijou gritted his teeth and thought.

There was no way that was the case.

Fräulein Kreutune may have eventually left the windowless building even if Kamijou and Thor had done nothing. Even if she had not, Gremlin may have destroyed the windowless building's armor. Ollerus's group may have used some method to smartly abduct her. With all the different "ifs" surrounding her, she may have left the windowless building and gained the function to eat human brains regardless of Kamijou's actions.

But…

For that very reason…

"…I refuse…to accept it…"

Something was flowing from his right side. As it did, an unpleasant shaking began across his entire body. Yet Kamijou still used the frail power remaining in him to forcibly grab at the ground. He was trying to make a small foothold so he could stand up.

The fact that Fräulein Kreutune had obtained the function to eat human brains was indeed a major problem. But did that mean it would have been right to leave her trapped in the windowless building forever? Could he really have let that happen? He could not just cover up one problem with another. It was absolutely wrong to accept a problem just because it was smaller than another problem.

He would not accept it.

He could not accept it.

No matter how she had been treated during her long, long history…

Even if she was a human with a complex and messed up structure that no one could explain…

Fräulein Kreutune had finally made it “outside”.

Even if it was a dangerous tightrope act and even if she was merely squeezing through the gaps, she had still obtained freedom.

And…

Now that she had walked out below the sun literally for the first time in decades, the world spread out before her.

Kamijou absolutely refused to accept that that world had to be a nightmare filled with nothing but blood, death, and violence.

Slowly.

Kamijou Touma slowly stood up. He placed a hand on a nearby roadside tree to forcibly support his body that was even now about to collapse underneath him. Even so, he managed to stand up.

He had no idea how many more hours he would last.

He had his doubts he would even last half an hour.

But that did not change what Kamijou had to do. He had to destroy all of the messed up shackles, nightmares, and conditions surrounding Fräulein Kreutune.

(Where did Fräulein Kreutune go?)

He looked around and silently moved away from the tree. As soon as he did, he almost collapsed to the ground, but he somehow withstood it. And then he took another step.

He could still walk.

He could still move.

After discovering that, a small smile appeared on his lips, but then all strength suddenly left his knees. He tried to regain his balance, but it did not work. His upper body headed for the ground.

But then he felt something soft support his body.

It felt like someone had reached out from the side just as he was about to collapse.

"…?"

He tried to turn his head, but his body refused to listen.

And…

"…I finally found you," whispered a girl's voice, but Kamijou could not understand it.

However, this was not because his body was not working properly due to blood loss.

Kamijou Touma had never been able to understand French.

"You are the key to the official members of Gremlin. You are the piece I absolutely need to carry out my revenge. Finally. I can finally begin my life."

She was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl who appeared to be about 12 or 13.

And she wore a dress made up of a wetsuit and a clear material that created the overall silhouette of a fairy tale heroine.

She was one of those who produced that hell in Hawaii.

She had once named herself as a member of Gremlin.

The magician known as Cendrillon gave a dark smile and spoke in French.

"So do not die yet. I need you for my revenge."

Part 6

As the white Rhinoceros Beetle 05 floated Last Order and Fremea Seivelun above it like a skydiving training device, it moved from the complexly intersecting subway tunnels, through large scale city heating pipes and multipurpose drains used for flood prevention, and finally to an underground pathway that was under construction. From there, they headed out the exit and to the surface that was overflowing with sunlight.

Normally, a giant beetle would probably have caused a commotion, but the Ichihanaransai was underway. During that festival, the schools across Academy City used the city's cutting edge technology to compete for focus that would lead to more students hoping to attend that school. It was a bit unusual for performances to be held outside the school grounds, but people still viewed it as normal enough given the special circumstances. (Of course, it probably helped that word of the commotion caused by the other beetles had not yet reached that area. Access to the major SNSs could be difficult on the day of a major event.)

But they could not just stay there forever.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05's creator was receiving full-scale support from Academy City. If he had free use of the cameras and sensors around the city, he would be able to spot that large beetle moving through the city.

The beetle had few options.

The first option was to allow Last Order and Fremea to take advantage of their small size and escape via some small area such as a ventilation duct. Once they did, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 could go elsewhere and cause a commotion as a diversion.

The second option was to be constantly moving around at high speed and not using any one hiding spot. Even if their location was detected using the cameras or sensors, they could hide their presence by always moving elsewhere before anyone could rush to their location.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 stopped temporarily at an impromptu basketball court made from an empty lot between buildings. While still keeping Last Order and Fremea floating above it, the beetle also changed the amplitude of its giant wings to produce an artificial voice to begin explaining the situation.

Both options were risky, but the white Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had decided the former was less so. In the former option, the girls could move through areas with no cameras or sensors while the latter option required them to be exposed to the cameras and sensors.

But…

“Nyah, nyah! Are you still saying that!? In the first place, I can never abandon you now that you have the mark of the Hamazura Brigade!!”

“We can manage somehow if all three of us are together, so don’t worry, says Misaka as Misaka slaps her chest to show her determination.”

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had no say in the decision. Shoving Last Order and Fremea into a narrow duct or a dumpster would be meaningless if they would simply follow the beetle as it tried to create a diversion.

Even if it was more of a risk, the beetle had to act alongside the girls.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 immediately changed its line of thought.

“The two of you are being pursued by several different enemies, but I suggest we give those enemies an order of priority and act based on that.”

“Nyah, what enemies?”

“Currently, there are two major enemies. The first is the force made up of my colleagues…that is, the weapons created by the #2’s Level 5 Dark Matter…and Kakine Teitoku who controls them. But while this force is incredibly powerful, I can easily estimate what their actions will be. After all, I am a part of it. I simply have to think about *what I would do in a given situation.*”

That could also work against them as the enemy could estimate their actions the same way, but it was better than nothing.

At the very least, the situation would not turn deadly the very instant they happened across that force.

And on that note…

“The more dangerous enemy is Fräulein Kreutune. I do not know how powerful she is or what her behavioral patterns are, so the risk of a surprise attack is exceedingly high.”

Only the bare minimum of data on her had been enclosed within Rhinoceros Beetle 05.

It took the estimated derivative information of that data and converted it into words.

“Fräulein Kreutune is a creature that ecloses due to acquired information. She has come up with a way to gather massive amounts of information faster than observing it with her normal five senses. *She wishes to take control of the massive electromagnetic information network known as the Misaka Network.*”

“Nyah???”

Fremea gave a blank look, but Last Order fell into a deep silence.

“That network uses identical brainwaves and it can be felt as long as one has a means of manipulating bioelectricity. For example, my body is equipped with an organic antenna that uses the structure of the ampullae of Lorenzini that sharks use to find their prey. But…”

“Is it the same as how you cannot receive a TV signal by sticking a metal pole up into the air? says Misaka as Misaka asks for confirmation.”

“Yes, you need a program to act as a decoder. The most suitable person for that is you as you play the role of the command tower…or rather, of the external interface. By consuming your brain, she hopes to access the electromagnetic information inside of you by copying the entire labyrinth of synapses that is your brain. If she succeeds in that, she will take control of the Misaka Network, and quickly achieve eclosion by absorbing the entire information network.”

“Consume…do you mean eat? says Misaka as Misaka asks you a question.”

“Nyah! She would never do that! She said she was our friend!!”

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 hoped they were right.

But it doubted they were.

The data it had been given said those two girls had run across Fräulein Kreutune the previous night.

And Fräulein Kreutune had only obtained the function to consume brains once the date had changed at midnight.

It was best not to think of her as the same person she had been the night before.

“Fräulein Kreutune is not being driven by reason, thoughts, desires, urges, or instinct…this is nothing more than a function. And for that reason, it is powerful. Just as someone who uses their cell phone calculator forgets how to do simple arithmetic in their head and someone who uses their cell phone’s input method editor forget how to write kanji, this new function has *forcibly changed* her way of life. Fräulein Kreutune’s own thought patterns are of no consequence. Even if she tries to stop herself, this function will overcome her.”

She was a human who no one had been able to kill by any method for hundreds of years.

She was now approaching using the fastest method available to her in order to devour a small girl’s head.

To be blunt, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had determined it was unlikely it could stop Fräulein Kreutune’s advance even if it was able to attack in any way it wanted. Firing countless shells, charging at her with its giant body, stabbing at her with its thick horn… The beetle could think of countless ways of doing great damage, but it could see no way that would stop her.

The beetle had a mental image of her legs continuing inexorably forward even if her head was blown off, her heart crushed, or her entire upper body ripped off.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 itself was a weapon with no weak point. It was made to eventually regenerate any damage and regain freedom of movement even if it took some time.

But Fräulein Kreutune was a bit different.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had a nice proportional relationship between the amount of damage done and the time needed to regenerate, but no such relationship could be seen in Fräulein Kreutune.

The beetle would be unable to move for a while if it was heavily damaged, but Fräulein Kreutune could continue the attack with zero time lag even when heavy damage was done.

It was a subtle difference, but Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was able to understand exactly what it meant like an artisan who had reached a certain level of skill.

Ideally, they would never meet her.

That was Rhinoceros Beetle 05's conclusion.

Facing her would be like playing an extended game of poker against an opponent that had an infinite amount of money to bet. The slightest mistake would bankrupt you. You would never last if you kept at it.

Luckily, Fräulein Kreutune could only travel using her own four limbs.

She could not suddenly grow wings or spit out strings like a spider.

It would raise the risk of being captured by Kakine Teitoku and his weapons, but they could set a hurdle obstructing her path simply by travelling along building walls or moving from rooftop to rooftop. The beetle could use the special characteristics of its insect-based form to their fullest.

But as Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was thinking that…

"Nyah. If that's the case, we need to save her!!"

"Our friend is suffering, so we have no choice, agrees Misaka as Misaka nods."

Their thoughts had shot off in a completely different direction.

The answer the beetle had come to based on its many different decisions had been completely blown away.

As Rhinoceros Beetle 05 fell into a confused state like a machine that had lost track its current coordinate position due to electromagnetic interference, the two girls spoke.

"After all, you said this doesn't have anything to do with her thoughts. That means it isn't her fault. I don't get all this hard stuff about functions or whatever, but we can't overlook this if she's being forced to do it."

"Misaka knows what it is like, says Misaka as Misaka remembers. Misaka knows how painful it is to be made to do something you don't want to for someone else's gain due to a program or a virus or whatever, says Misaka as Misaka taps her temple with her index finger. We can't let this happen. If that is happening to Misaka's friend, we have to save her, says Misaka as Misaka makes an announcement."

Because she was suffering.

Because they wanted to save her.

Because she was their friend.

Because.

The white Rhinoceros Beetle 05 fell silent when it saw that those girls would act based on such small reasons despite knowing their lives would be at risk if they were actually attacked. The beetle analyzed why its carefully calculated thought process had not been valid. In addition to the standard logical thought process, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had also obtained the ability to produce signal patterns modeled after simple human emotions. It began to investigate why it had been unable to predict how those girls would feel.

It came to a likely conclusion:

Because they possessed real hearts.

They put emotions above logic. They put their wishes above calculations. Even if it was foolish, that may have been what a real human heart was. Even if it was ridiculous, it was something precious that no one could laugh at.

In that case, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had no choice but to go along with it.

The answer those girls had come to was something precious, noble, and beautiful. But at the same time, it was immature, dangerous, and would likely lead to failure. And so something was needed to bridge the gap between the ideal and reality. Before Last Order and Fremea could save anyone with that answer, something was needed to break through the risks of reality.

That irregular beetle that had left its creator Kakine Teitoku's control was unlikely to have much of a future.

Its fate was to be pursued by its master Kakine Teitoku with nowhere to return to and no new goal point. Its fate was to be rejected as an outsider or a rampaging weapon by all other organizations and groups.

So…

It would at least make sure to return these two girls to the place they had come from. If it was normal to risk one's life for a friend in their world, the beetle would give priority to their way of doing things. And so it would not just view it as an objective to work at; it would make sure to perfectly accomplish it no matter what.

And that would also give meaning to the fact that it had left its master's control.

“Understood,” said the white Rhinoceros Beetle 05 using its giant wings as it felt great inner distress over how great a risk it estimated this to be. “We will escape Kakine Teitoku’s pursuit and also work to save Fräulein Kreutune. Is that okay?”

“That’s what it means to be friends! says Misaka as Misaka bangs her palm against your open armor plate while floating in midair!”

“Nyah! I wouldn’t expect any other answer from a member of the Hamazura Brigade. Doing your best is great, but never forget that we all have to return home together!!”

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 lacked the ability to create expressions using the muscles of the face.

But it felt that was for the best.

It appreciated the girls’ promise, but it doubted it could live up to that.

Part 7

The repeated sound of concrete being struck by metal grew more distant. The sound was coming from an underground tunnel, but Hamazura was still able to hear it from the surface.

“It sounds like those beetles are heading somewhere else.”

“Do you think they’re chasing Fremea and the other girl?”

Yoshikawa Kikyou operated her cell phone while glancing over at Hamazura and Takitsubo who were discussing the issue.

But she did not receive a response.

“She isn’t answering… But it might be safer if her phone isn’t on. That eliminates a means for her pursuers to track her location.”

“What do you think happened?” asked Hamazura.

“I am not exactly optimistic, but my guess is those beetles are chasing the two girls. I doubt their specs are low enough to lose to children’s legs and yet they still have not caught up. I suppose the logical conclusion is that someone or something is helping them.”

“Like that irregular beetle?”

Hamazura recalled that giant beetle that had blocked the exit with its own body.

But he was left with the question of who had released those weapons and for what purpose. And if they were being controlled by someone, were they equipped with any unpleasant functions?

For example…

Could the irregular beetle's own thoughts be bypassed to give top priority to a remote command?

"Those tunnels were made for many different purposes: subway lines, underground passageways, multipurpose drains, and laying cable and other infrastructure. However, they all have one thing in common. Their layout is about as convoluted as an ant hill. If they are travelling while ignoring traffic rules, it would be difficult to predict what exit whoever is guiding them will use."

"Even if we do catch up to them, what then? The pursuers will not be far behind. They have at least the firepower of a tank and they have a vector control technique to delicately manipulate shockwaves. Plus, they can regenerate given enough time even if split in two. …This is no enemy to stand up to with something like a bazooka," said Yoshikawa.

"There's still something we can do." Hamazura crouched down and used a small rock he found to scrape a simple schematic diagram on the sidewalk. "We can't destroy these beetles. In fact, they will regenerate even if we do. But what if we just obstruct them? For example, if we stab them with a bunch of thick hooked stakes like the harpoons used to kill sharks, they wouldn't be able to pull them out."

"Hamazura, do you know how tough their armor is?" asked Takitsubo.

"We saw a bunch of them fighting, remember? Maybe it's because they're made to regenerate, but they definitely didn't look like their armor is so ridiculously strong that not even a nuke could destroy them. If we use something like what anti-terror teams use to break down doors, we should be able to break through their armor."

"I remember a handheld pile bunker that could destroy fairly thick airtight doors being developed in case an armed group took over a research facility," commented Yoshikawa. "Of course, people said it could lead to terrorism itself if it was misused."

That type of handheld pile bunker would be stored in Anti-Skill stations or vehicles or in the disaster prevention boxes in research facilities. Hamazura was not particularly proud of the fact, but he could get his hands on one if he used the skills he had gained in Skill-Out.

To shoot through those white rhinoceros beetles' armor, they would have to carry that heavy equipment right up to them. But to remain at a safe distance from those white rhinoceros beetles that had the specs of a tank, they needed to defeat the beetles while staying over 5 kilometers away. They of course could not prepare any means of doing that. And any distance less than 5 kilometers was the same. Whether they were 4 kilometers away or only 1 mm away from the enemy, they would still be shot by those shells the instant they were detected.

They could only succeed in an attack if they had a weapon small enough to carry in their hands and were able to travel without the enemy detecting them.

That would be best.

"But Hamazura, that means…" said Takitsubo.

"Yeah, the irregular one protecting the girls isn't perfect either. If its movements are sealed, they'll be defenseless. We need to save them before that happens."

But suddenly they heard a familiar voice come from the side.

"Hm? What the hell? What is going on here?"

"Mugino?" said Hamazura in puzzlement after he turned around.

Standing next to Mugino's tall form was Kinuhata Saiai who was waving at them.

"We were attacked by some annoying person before dawn and we picked up on something super suspicious going on in the city. I only just super lost that pain-in-the-ass Kuroyoru and met up with Mugino when all of a sudden I super spotted you two."

"Hamazura, explain the situation in 30 seconds."

As the situation required a lot of explanation, Hamazura began speaking very quickly. Mugino followed along politely enough at the beginning, but before long she fell silent and a displeased look appeared on her face. By the end of the explanation, she had grabbed Hamazura by the collar.

"Is that so, Hamazura? So what you're saying is you have no idea where Fremea is, you've left her with an out-of-control weapon that might not be safe, and you have no idea why she is being attacked or who is behind it?"

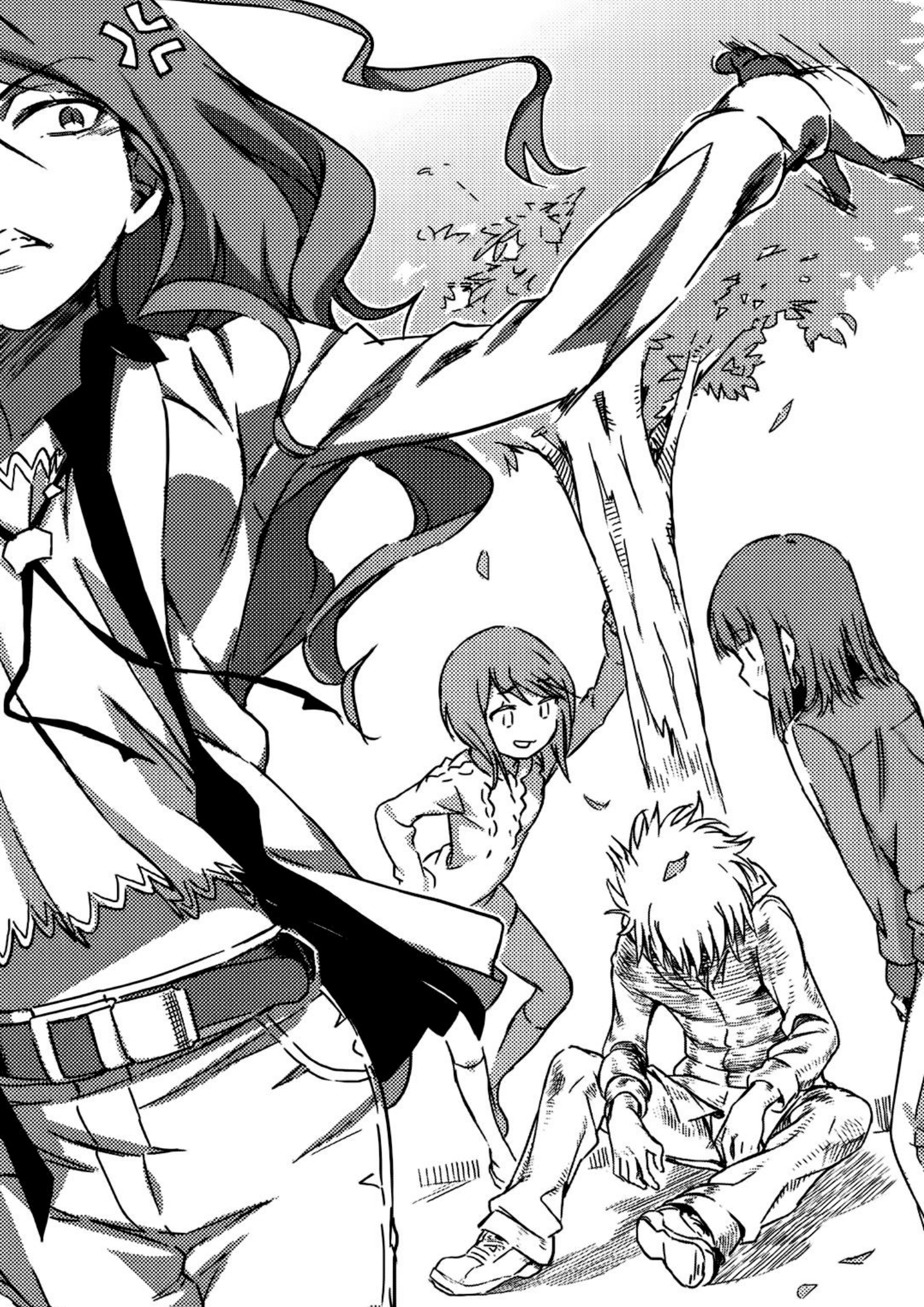
"Heh…Eh heh heh. You could put it like that, I suppose."

"…"

"Wait, Mugino, wait! This may be unfortunate, but forgive Hamazura!!"

“Yeah, if you keep slapping Hamazura with your fake arm, you’ll super knock his head off!!”

Kinuhata and Takitsubo frantically tried to stop the tyrannical queen after they saw Hamazura’s head sway back and forth in time to repeated striking sounds as if he had become a human metronome.



With the casualness of throwing away an empty drink can, Mugino tossed that high school boy to the side with one hand. He crashed into a roadside tree and slid down to the ground. It was hard to tell whether she had been releasing him or delivering the final blow.

“You get a failing grade for pretty much everything about that, but the one thing that is truly out of the question is your means of opposing the enemy weapons. What is this nonsense about it all being over once you’re spotted whether you’re 4 kilometers away or 1 mm away? Your plan is as irrational as deciding to throw a landmine because you don’t have a missile. Of course being 4 kilometers away is safer than being 1 mm away.”

Hamazura felt a strong desire to look away since he actually had once thrown a landmine at an armored vehicle in the snowy plains of Russia, but averting his gaze might upset Mugino and that could make her begin again with those deadly slaps.

And so he simply told the truth rather than making unnecessary excuses.

“But we aren’t Anti-Skill or some dark side organization that has proper support. Where are we supposed to find a means of attacking from kilometers away that can break through their arm-…bffaaah!!!???”

Hamazura suddenly shouted out because Mugino had mercilessly used her heel to step on his crotch as he sat on the ground.

Hamazura looked like he was about to start foaming at the mouth.

As he began to tremble, Takitsubo stared at him with a blank look in her eyes and said, “Hamazura, what’s wrong? Why are you shaking?”

“Maybe his entire body is just super grateful for that unexpected reward.”

The real answer was that he was simply unable to give a straight reaction.

Just as Hamazura began to seriously worry about where a girl’s boiling point was, he heard Mugino’s voice.

“Basically, you just need firepower that can take out a tank from 5 kilometers away, right? *That’s easier than spinning a pen in my fingers.* Why are you getting so worried about something like this that you’re preparing yourself to run up with a landmine in hand? What nonsense.”

“…Mugino?”

“Or what? Are you trying to say Mugino Shizuri-san’s #4 Level 5 power of Meltdowner is cheaper and harder to use than some 10,000 yen rocket launcher!? Well, Haaamazuraaa!?”

“Noooooooooooooooo!! I don’t know if you’re trying to cover up your embarrassment or if you really are pissed, but stop performing a denki anma in public! And the heel of your boot is seriously about to crush them, so stooooooooooooppppppppppppppp!!”

Hamazura was unable to do anything to stop that hell of adolescence. As his consciousness grew faint, he noticed Yoshikawa Kikyou had called someone with her cell phone. She had said she was unable to reach Last Order, so this was likely someone else.

And…

That intellectual woman who would probably look good in a lab coat grew visibly dejected as she spoke. She looked like a plant that had been left in the window during the heat of summer or a child who was being scolded by her teacher for forgetting her homework.

By the time she had hung up, a dark mood had come over Yoshikawa.

With a somehow distant look in her eyes, she asked, “It looks like I am also going to be scolded for inadequate supervision. I wonder if I will receive a denki anma from a high level esper too.”

Part 8

After coming up to the surface, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 came to a stop while thinking. It lowered Last Order and Fremea to the ground nearby. It could have continued to keep them floating in midair using its giant thin wings, but they had started to rotate around and around on their centers of gravity and enjoying themselves so much that other children were drawing near. The beetle decided it was best to stop for the moment.

“Do you know about the Ichihanaransai? asks Misaka as Misaka turns her nose up at you.”

“Um…”

“Nyah! In the first place, how many times do I have to tell you I can’t stand having you looking down on me like that!?”

“Can you listen to me for a moment? Hello?”

At first glance, it appeared Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had left Kakine Teitoku’s control, but it had been unable to completely escape the #2’s curse. Even now, the order to eliminate the reason behind Fräulein Kreutune’s actions by killing Last Order was constantly repeating itself inside the beetle’s head(?).

“Tah dah! Misaka has the card for the stamp rally, says Misaka as Misaka shows it off. If you don’t have one of these ahead of time, you can’t enjoy the events, says Misa-…”

“Nyah, nyah!! I have one of those too!”

The reason Rhinoceros Beetle 05 did not actually take action on that order was because it was using its role of “narrowing down ideas” to constantly intentionally convert the oral command into its own interpretation. It was not rejecting the command or creating a new command on its own. The relationship of master and slave had not changed.

“We both have a card! In the first place, we need to see who wins as we go around to the school stands!”

“What happened to wanting to save Fräulein Kreutune!?” asked the beetle.

And so…

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 determined that it itself was most definitely one of the biggest threats to the two girls before it.

“Heh heh heh. Just filling up the stamp rally card is easy enough, but the elegance of the card changes depending on what stamps you use, says Misaka as Misaka explains the situation. Don’t think you can defeat Misaka without filling your card up with stamps for foods limited to 15 people or secret stamps! says Misaka as Misaka declares her victory.”

If Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was given an oral command intentionally made so it was unable to convert it incorrectly, it would be forced to kill Last Order and Fremea without hesitation.

“Nyah! I need to hurry up!! At this rate, you’ll hog all of the dangerous rare stamps for yourself!!”

“Hnya ha ha ha ha!! If you think dangerous rare is as high as it goes, you have no chance of defeating Misa-…Wait ,wait! Hear Misaka out before running off, says Misaka as Misaka-…!!”

And even if things did not go that far, if the information being gathered by the beetle’s five senses was shared with the entirety of what made up the “#2”, the Dark Matter army would be on them in no time at all.

“Huh? Where did those girls go?”

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 stopped thinking once it noticed the noisy voices were growing more distant. It emitted its artificial voice with its wings, but it received no response.

When it looked around, it found the two girls charging toward a nearby school with stamp rally cards in hand. The beetle decided the girls had lost all awareness of the fact they were being pursued. It needed to capture them immediately to keep them safe.

But how?

It could use its giant wings to float the girls in the air, but that did not possess the powerful constraining ability needed to capture people who were running around at random.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 rechecked the specs on the foremost two of its six legs. Those legs were made to provide high speed movement and suppress the recoil when firing a shell. They also had claw-like spikes on the end, so there was a very real risk of slicing the girls apart if it tried to restrain them with its legs.

After thinking for a while, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 simply gave up.

It could not think of a way.

“Fine then!”

A few orange sparks began to fly from the asphalt as Rhinoceros Beetle 05 began chasing after Last Order and Fremea.

As it was the first day of the Ichihanaransai, the area around a school was crowded with students. The beetle saw no way it could blend into that scene, but to its surprise, no major commotion occurred.

A flood of voices reached its ears…or rather, the thin wings it spread out to detect the vibrations in the air.

“This is from that leading university, right? That thing where they fight while riding robots shaped like rhinoceros beetles or stag beetles. Boys sure do love bugs.”

“But did they have a white one? Is it a rare version or something???”

“The sad truth is that they will lose their research funding if they don’t periodically display the fruits of their research in a way even a child can understand.”

Once they had accepted the beetle in their own way, they saw no reason to find fault in it. Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was a bit worried about the fact that a strange weapon could make its way onto a school campus without any kind of permit, but it was finally able to catch up to the two girls running through the makeshift labyrinth of stands.

It seemed they were able to pay up front by handing their subway IC cards to the schoolgirl running the stand.

“What are you doing?” asked the beetle.

“Nyah, nyah!! This is a sharpshooting stand! Don’t you think it’s cheating to make the rare stamp itself be the prize!? In the first place, it’s too small to hit!!”

“Is it true the standard thing to do with these is to shoot the girl running the stand? asks Misaka as Misaka holds the cork gun in one hand.”

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 looked over at the stand.

The middle school girl running it was forcing a smile, but the smile was beginning to twitch a bit. The stand itself had several stepped shelves made of wood with cute stuffed animals and other prizes set up on them. It seemed to be a game where one attempted to shoot those prizes with the rifle.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 shook its cannon barrel slightly in a mannerism similar to tilting its head in confusion.

“Isn’t this a slightly violent setup?”

“What are you saying? Misaka feels a lot sorrier for the one stuffed animal that is left all alone in the end, insists Misaka as Misaka holds up her cork gun. This strike will release this stuffed animal’s soul! says Misaka as Misaka leans way up over the counter to bring her cork gun closer to the target which is completely fair and definitely not cheati-…fgyahhh!!”

“…”

As Last Order practically climbed up on top of the counter, she very nearly fell inside the stand like a seesaw, so the middle school girl frantically stopped her.

As Fremea used up cork bullet after cork bullet in her attempt to hit the rare stamp, she suddenly turned toward Rhinoceros Beetle 05.

More specifically, she turned to look at the thick horn that acted as its cannon barrel.

“Nyah. You can’t use that.”

“I know that.”

“Nyah, nyah!! No matter how much trouble I have trying to hit the rare stamp, in the first place you can’t get frustrated and use that!!”

“I am having trouble determining whether you are trying to stop me or to get me to do it. At any rate, I am not going to.”

While providing that ideal response, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 continued staring at the stuffed animals lined up within the sharpshooting stand.

They were all nothing but colored cloth stuffed with cotton and shaped like animals.

One was shaped like the animal known as a lion, so it was called a lion.

One was shaped like the animal known as a giraffe, so it was called a giraffe.

One was shaped like the animal known as an elephant, so it was called an elephant.

It seemed that the standard human way of looking at it was that the one shaped like a lion was not called an elephant even though they were both made in the exact same way and they both contained the exact same thing inside. Yet the leather shoes the middle school girl running the stand was wearing were made of real cowhide yet they were not called a cow.

That mysterious world where the real thing and imitations were mixed together got Rhinoceros Beetle 05 wondering what that would make it.

Was it a rhinoceros beetle because its external appearance was made to look like one?

Was it Dark Matter because it was made up of that single material?

Was it merely something that was constantly receiving orders from Academy City’s #2?

Was there any value in something that continued to intentionally misinterpret its orders?

“Nyah. Do you want the lion?”

“What?”

“In the first place, you’ve been staring at it. If you want it, just say so! We can work together to get it! Nyah, nyah. So point that giant horn towards the stand.”

“…I told you I am not going to fire.”

“You don’t have to, so hurry, hurry.”

Still confused, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 simply did as it was told. When it did, Fremea suddenly started to climb up it. She slowly made her way to the tip with her thighs wrapped tightly around the thick horn as if she was carefully crossing a log lying across a canyon.

When she reached the end of the cannon that was practically sticking into the stand, she held up her cork gun with an air of importance.

“Nyah. I can’t miss at point blank range!!”

“…”

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 did not want to help her cheat, so it shook its cannon barrel back and forth.

The schoolgirl running the stand still did not understand some of what was going on, so she simply smiled at what she could understand of the situation.

Right after that, the small sound of a crack running within Rhinoceros Beetle 05’s body could be heard.

The toll leaving Kakine Teitoku’s control had taken on the beetle was finally beginning to show itself.

Part 9

Some kind of bombardment had suddenly occurred in District 7.

That small piece of information had reached the magicians who had wasted their time heading to District 12.

Silvia.

Brunhild Eiktobel.

Leivinia Birdway.

“It’s possible this is another diversion that will just waste our time, but it’s definitely better than *nothing*. Even a decoy can give you information if you push them hard enough,” muttered the Saint named Silvia while sounding bored.

She took a bite of a sandwich and a sip of some coffee from a world famous chain restaurant before expressionlessly pushing the entire plate away from her.

The plate ended up next to Brunhild, but she pushed it aside to Leivinia.

“Who we will find at the scene of this bombardment will change depending on whether it was simply a struggle to secure the rampaging Fräulein Kreutune or if it was a diversion meant to draw our attention. If it is simply the conclusion, it could become quite the drawn out battle with everyone after Fräulein Kreutune gathered in one place,” said Brunhild as she took a

bite of a hot dog, grimaced, covered the entire thing in yellow mustard, and began eating it again. “And if it is an elaborate diversion, who set it up? Was it Gremlin? Was it the hidden side of Academy City? Or was it…”

“Kamijou Touma?” said Leivinia as she cut up a small salad with a fork without even glancing at the plate that had ended up with her. “I doubt he would carry out a diversion with a strong destructive side to it…or at least not of his own will. It all depends on who he is working with. To be honest, I sometimes cannot predict how his mind will work.”

Silvia gave a thin smile when she heard Leivinia spit out those words.

“So are you a sulking child? Well, it does suit you and I personally like it.”

“…What?”

“You look like a girl after the older neighborhood boy she relied on moves on and leaves her behind. Then again, he did manage to trick you despite being shot in an unexpected accident. So are you just surprised that someone you have been looking down on was thinking things through more deeply than you thought? But that is just how people are. People always think about a lot more than other people think they do.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“*I don’t know who you are mad at right now,*” said Silvia to simply brush it aside. “But your anger is misdirected. You deceived him as much as you liked for your own ends, but now you can’t stand that he got you back? That is childish. You need to be prepared for people to do to you what you do to them. You should count yourself lucky he didn’t get you back two or three times worse than you did to him.”

“…”

The restaurant became filled with a feeling like something invisible was burning.

In a more dangerous country, the other customers may have realized it was killer intent.

Silvia was of course the type of person who knew perfectly well what it was.

Yet she ignored it and continued to speak.

“Of course, there are plenty of different reasons to deceive people. People often explain away what they said as being a ‘kind lie’. I suppose this would be especially hard on you if that was your intent. For example, if by any chance *you were trying to get a certain someone to safely drop out of this dispute with Gremlin before it intensified too-…*”

A high pitched noise like glass shattering exploded out.

It was unclear what had happened just by looking at the scene.

Leivinia Birdway was reaching her slender arm across the table and Brunhild Eiktobel had grabbed her wrist.

Silvia was still grinning.

A single drop of red was trailing down from the corner of her mouth.

“Restrain yourself,” muttered Brunhild quietly.

Leivinia roughly shook her hand free and spoke disinterestedly.

“Where is Ollerus?”

“*Preparing.*”

Leivinia openly clicked her tongue at Silvia’s simple response.

And then she stood up from her chair.

“Then let’s get started on our own. …This time, we will crush everything so thoroughly that nothing remains.”

Two of the fewer than 20 Saints in the world and the boss of one of the greatest magic cabals in England.

Those monsters possessed enough power to destroy an entire nation that had weak magical defenses. And they would soon take action.

Part 10

“Rainbow yakisoba!!” announced Fremea as she proudly showed off a noodle dish that’s coloration was obviously much too artificial.

They had visited around 13 schools, but the girls were showing no sign of tiring. Given the makeup of their muscle tissue, they had to have been feeling fatigue, but Rhinoceros Beetle 05 determined the chemical secretions in their brains must have been slowing their awareness of that fact.

(I wish…)

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 thought while an odd cracking noise could be heard from within its body.

(I wish I could deal with it in the same way…)

It was made from Academy City’s #2 Level 5 power of Dark Matter.

Originally, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 could have easily taken a blast from a tank and could have regenerated almost instantly from a blast from a battleship.

But the beetle was not actually all that tough.

It may have been similar to how the skin protecting an animal would rot if it was not made into a sturdy bag.

The slave was nothing more than a wonderful material. It was the master's job to make use of it.

"Nyah? Why are you being so quiet?"

"Oh, no reason…"

"Are you hungry? In the first place, you can have half of my rainbow yakisoba!"

"I wish to decline that offer with all of my being."

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 focused on rechecking its condition while hiding its internal destruction.

Academy City's #2, Kakine Teitoku, and Fräulein Kreutune had to still be pursuing them. The beetle had input the initial condition that the chance of danger was lower if they remained constantly on the move than if they remained in one place. And on top of that, it had decided letting their path be decided by those girls' seemingly random ideas was harder to read than mechanically calculating out the shortest and most optimal escape route.

Then again…

It did mostly come down to the fact that Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had simply given in to Last Order and Fremea who were restlessly darting from one place to the next.

"Heh heh heh. Misaka has filled in half the stamps, says Misaka as Misaka snickers."

Last Order had bought a bag filled with various prism-shaped sugar candies, but after grabbing just two or three of them, she tied up the clear bag with a fluffily decorated wire.

"These are a present, says Misaka as Misaka puts them in the storage area."

It seemed the "storage area" was Rhinoceros Beetle 05's cannon barrel. Ever since they had acquired that fluffy wire, the girls had been tying bags filled with sweets to that cannon like it was a clothesline.

"A butterfly would be cuter, says Misaka as Misaka complains."

“You are being prejudiced. Please think about it rationally. You cannot tell them apart from moths.”

“Hah hah hah. Yes, but a rhinoceros beetle with a black shine would look just like a cockroa-…”

The beetle vibrated its giant thin wings to block out the rest of her comment with a reverse phase sound wave.

There were some things that simply should not be said.

“Um, can we get back to the real issue at hand?” asked the beetle.

“Nyah? What’s that?”

“Your earlier comments suggested you wished to take action to save Fräulein Kreutune, but how do you plan to do that? One problem that occurs to me is that we do not know where she is.”

“Hah hah hah. Leave that to Misaka! says Misaka as Misaka puffs out her chest proudly!” Last Order grew meaninglessly cocky. “I gave her a security buzzer so we could contact each other! says Misaka as Misaka reveals her secret plan. It has a GPS on it, so we can tell where she is right away, says Misaka as Misaka explains further!”

“Nyah, nyah! That was my buzzer!!”

“That sounds…”

Rhinoceros Beetle was going to finish with “…like a rather dangerous factor”, but it did not put that part to words.

Even someone who had no reason to target Last Order or Fremea directly could use that as a reason to target the girls in order to pursue Fräulein Kreutune.

Also, Last Order and Fremea trusted their “friend” unconditionally, so they had given no thought to what would happen once they found Fräulein Kreutune. The beetle approved of the idea of saving her, but approaching her unconditionally was like asking to be attacked. They needed some kind of plan.

“Anyway, we bought a bunch of presents, so let’s go meet her now, says Misaka as Misaka begins running!”

“I already told you I get to go first!! Don’t run off like that!”

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 heard the sound of a large crack forming as it began pursuit of those girls who had run off in some random direction once more.

(Measuring self collapse pattern. Adding burden caused by travel method. Beginning simulation…Some ability to control direction of crack advancement proven.)

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 could not avoid the cracks from forming, but it seemed able to control where they formed and how quickly they spread with its own actions.

The beetle called up a few tactical patterns and came to a conclusion.

(Cutting off crack advancement towards body surface. Readjusting direction of collapse towards inner portions of body.)

Even if it was made of Dark Matter, no one would normally decide to allow their inner structure be eaten away to protect their outer appearance.

And yet Rhinoceros Beetle 05 chose to do so.

If its damage was discovered, Last Order and Fremea's random movements would be restricted.

The beetle had determined one of the reasons they had yet to be attacked was because of the randomness of their movements that no adult could predict.

That meant the worst thing they could do was stay in one place.

The beetle saw no meaning in drawing out their utterly useless emotions in that moment.

"Nyah!! Hurry up! The rainbow yakisoba is going to get cold before we can give it to her!!"

"Understood," said Rhinoceros Beetle 05 using the artificial voice created by its giant wings.

It then began to think.

According to the data related to Fräulein Kreutune that had been inputted into it for the mission, she was trying to acquire a large amount of information by consuming Last Order's brain.

Once she had seen her "target", she would head straight for it while ignoring any obstacles in the way. It did not matter if there was lava or a concrete wall in between.

But if Fräulein Kreutune only knew how to head straight for her target without taking any danger into account, could it be possible to set up a trap?

Or could something cause her to no longer view Last Order as her target and stray from that path?

(But in both cases, I have too little sample information. And it is much too dangerous to attempt to gather information on the scene.)

The beetle of course could not entrust Last Order or Fremea to such a reckless plan.

If it came to it, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 would have to place itself in between them.

In its perfect state, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was a monster supported by the #2 esper power in Academy City. It was possible it would be able to acquire some information during a fight with Fräulein Kreutune that could be used as a hint.

But…

Ominous cracks were beginning to run through Rhinoceros Beetle 05's body.

How long it would last was an unknown value.

In the worst case, it could even shatter like a piece of glasswork during the clash.

(From the beginning, I had incorporated into the plan that I will eventually be destroyed.)

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 thought silently while speeding up its legs to catch up with Last Order and Fremea.

It had to make sure the girls suspected nothing.

(But I hope to find some method of ensuring their safety before I am destroyed.)

It looked up into the sky.

The November sky was entirely dyed blue. Its shade was as clear as an answer reached via proven formulas.

But an airship cut across the sky.

For some reason, the large screen on its side was showing an image of schoolgirls in swimsuits.

"The beauty contest at Eiri Academy High School is causing lots of excitement on the first day of the Ichihanaransai! The amazing freedom of allowing outsiders to participate and allowing the contestants to bring their own swimsuits has really raised the level of the competition! I'm sure some

of you are wondering if bandages or bandaids really count as swimsuits, but let's not worry too much about that! But of those with normal swimsuits, the two with the most focus are definitely Academy City's #5, Shokuhou Misaki-san, and the well-known and mysterious Kumokawa Seria-san whose age is a secret despite being a high school girl!! I've gotta say, they are pretty damn amazing!!"

"I am only up here because my friends forced me, but why would anyone be interested in some old woman who refuses to even come over here?"

"I just need to ask: why did I all of a sudden find myself on this stage doing this? And the reason I am keeping to the opposite side of the stage is because I do not want to enter your range, little girl."

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 did not want the girls staring at that, so it opened up the pieces of armor used to store its giant wings and blocked Last Order and Fremea's view.

Having that formulaic blue sky filled with the color of skin seemed to ruin it in a few different ways.

Part 11

She did not want to gather any more attention than necessary, so Cendrillon grabbed Kamijou's arm as he sank to the ground and half carried and half dragged him to a nearby alley. When she pressed his upper body against the ground and forcibly rolled up his shirt, she grimaced.

"This is…a gunshot wound?" she said in French, but Kamijou did not respond.

The girl muttered something under her breath and the blood flowing from the wound emitted an unnatural pale blue light. But once the light moved to cover Kamijou's entire body, the light suddenly scattered like a candle being blown out.

Technically, it was the instant the light reached his right hand.

"So you negate even the simplest of healing methods. And yet the simpler the thing, the more powerful the effects. It will likely be difficult to interfere with anything that flows throughout your entire body."

After giving her French comments that she clearly was not expecting an answer to, Cendrillon pulled a handkerchief out from within her dress. She tore it in two, balled the pieces up, and held them in place to stop up the wounds on his side and his back.

“It is the most basic thing to do, and so it cannot hurt to do it. I can hold the cloth in place with duct tape.”

“Wait, don’t put something you found on the ground over my wounds!!”

Whatever he said, it seemed she had no intention of replying with anything other than French.

But she was acting so roughly he would not have been surprised if she tried to close his wounds with safety pins.

“Hold those in place,” said Cendrillon before disappearing somewhere. She returned a few minutes later with a pot filled with a clear liquid, a thick plastic bag, a tube, and a few other items.

Kamijou’s face grew pale and he opened his mouth to say, “Wait a second…”

“I have treated it with boiling water and alcohol.”

“Muttering things in French isn’t going to make me any less afraid. You’re not explaining anything! Please don’t tell me that’s an attempt at an IV made with way too much originality. Are you sure this is safe-…byaaaahhh!?”

Kamijou cried out as some strange substance was sent flowing into a vein on his arm.

And then he realized he was feeling good enough to shout out that vigorously.

“This is saline water with a concentration of 0.9%. It only manipulates your blood pressure to get rid of your body’s warning signals, but it can help you avoid falling into shock from blood loss.”

After having been turned into a human table and back to normal, Cendrillon treated things having to do with the human body in a rather dry manner.

“If you do not want to die, keep your wound in mind at all times. You are still of use to me.”

“Cough…”

Kamijou was a bit worried that he could still taste iron in his mouth.

He had first run into that girl in Hawaii and had found her again in Baggage City after Marian Slingeneyer had turned her into a table. Kamijou and Ollerus had returned her to her human form, but he did not remember her being so short.

When Kamijou took another serious look at Cendrillon’s face, she averted her gaze for some reason.

“…A lot has happened,” she muttered in French.

Part 12

The Lightning God Thor had climbed up on top of the water storage tank that sat on a building rooftop. As he glanced around and spotted after-effects of destruction and panicked students here and there, he let out an irritated groan.

From his vantage point, he could see both the direction in which Fräulein Kreutune was staggering and where Kamijou Touma lay curled up with his open wound. But he also spotted something else he could not overlook.

"Is that the Cendrillon I saw in the reports? I had nothing to do with the incident in Hawaii, so it really has nothing to do with me, but I get the feeling things would get really annoying if she spotted me."

But he could not let Fräulein Kreutune go free for much longer.

With the great commotion that had occurred, various different groups and various different people would soon be drawing in towards her. If he did nothing, she would either be captured or killed.

To solve the problem, he needed Kamijou Touma's right hand.

Thor did not want any great damage to be done to Academy City which was almost inevitable if those powerful enemies clashed. However, if everything was being collected in one location, it was possible he could still avoid that path of destruction even if doing so would be like walking a tightrope. He was most afraid of having Gremlin, Ollerus, and the monsters of Academy City's dark side beginning simultaneous battles all across the city. If that happened, mere individuals like Thor and Kamijou would be unable to stop the damage that would surely spread at an explosive rate.

(If possible, I wanted to solve each individual issue one at a time with surprise attacks and avoid having those powerful enemies clash at all…)

If one thought about it, Kamijou's ability to negate only the enemy's magic and Thor's direct firepower was the ideal combination for that method.

But like in all things, what mattered most was timing.

Now that the proper timing had been lost, they would have no chance to play the hand they had collected.

He needed to change his thought process.

To deal with those powerful enemies as they were gathered in one place, Thor wanted to meet up with Kamijou Touma. But to do that, he needed something that would distract the focus of Cendrillon and her intense hatred of Gremlin. But he had few pawns available to him.

If Cendrillon saw anyone from Gremlin, she would likely explode.

That meant Mjölnir was no good. And Marian Slingeneyer was most definitely out of the question. But who else did Thor know?

"…Found someone. I know that face from the FCE"

Thor grinned as he looked around from atop the water storage tank.

After performing a simple task on his cell phone, he unhesitatingly jumped from the tank. He was not jumping to the concrete floor of the roof. He jumped past the edge of the roof and down towards the ground where the people looked like mere specks.

Ignoring the artificial wind pressure blowing up from below, he prepared his legs for the landing.

Just before impact, arc fusion blades shot forcefully out from the bottom of his feet. The air violently expanded and rapidly lowered the speed of his fall.

He had no time to spare.

Thor ignored the crowd that was beginning to make a commotion over his appearance, raised a hand, and called out to his target with a smile.

"Hey there, Miko-chan. How are you doing?"

"Who are you!? Don't just start talking to me like we're friends!!"

The girl shouting as bluish-white sparks flew from her bangs was Misaka Mikoto, Academy City's #3 Level 5.

Technically, Thor had never met Misaka Mikoto, but he had thoroughly investigated her speech patterns using the FCE footage of her conversations in Hawaii in order to disguise himself as her. It would not be difficult to ad lib some way of getting her to do what he wanted.

And so…

Thor opened up his foreign-made cell phone to show her the small screen and he immediately got to the core of the issue.

"*I happen to have a photo of your friend Kamijou Touma-kun doing his usual thing by being nursed to health by some mysterious little blonde girl.* What do you think about that?"

"Tell me right this instant where he is."

Monster, monster, monster, monster.

The situation had developed to the point where one could look around and not see a single normal human being.

Some came from different parts of Academy and some came from outside the city.

They drew together in one spot for a single battle over a single girl.

Between the Lines 5

Fräulein Kreutune herself had mostly become a legend during her long history and various theories had spread regarding her origin.

It was said she was a real witch.

It was said she had taken on a newly evolved form of humanity after becoming infected by a special bacteria.

It was said she was an alien.

It was said she was nothing but a mass of flesh that lacked a soul.

It was said she was the “true form” of the human body after it had been truly optimized.

It was said she was an illusion created by the guilt of those carrying out the witch hunt.

It was said she was a time traveler that had the technology to discretely perceive timelines and to freely move between them. (This was often conflated with the alien theory.)

It was said she was not an individual but an organization by the same name.

It was said she was like a dark Santa Claus and was therefore a fictional being created to frighten children.

It was said she was a mysterious existence that had been discovered beneath thick ice.

It was said she was a play on words the compiler of a fairy encyclopedia had worked into the list.

The fact that so many different theories had spread had meaning in and of itself. For example, it meant a large number of people knew of her existence. It meant that many people had given it so much thought and yet had been unable to find the answer. It meant she had continued to gather attention and focus due to the fear and disgust people felt towards her.

And…

If one looked at the flood of different theories from a conspiracy theory viewpoint, it could be seen in a different way.

It was possible someone had intentionally released all that false information to hide the truth.

Or it was possible someone had randomly released that flood of information so it would be gathered as rumors, the wrong answers would be weeded out, and society would naturally approach the optimized answer. In other words, it was possible someone had been trying to automatically calculate out her identity.

It was true that Fräulein Kreutune was an eerie existence.

But there was no guarantee that she was the only frightening thing in this world.

Chapter 7: One Need Not be a Protagonist. *Girls_Battle_Talk.*

Part 1

First, there was a conversation.

Part 2

A certain multilevel overpass in District 7 was known as a bit of a landmark within Academy City. As the 12 boarding areas for a large scale bus roundabout were all connected by the overpass, it looked like an entire sports field created out of concrete. Also, the top level that could be called the "third floor" was made into a giant road and the underground area was filled with a complicated array of underground pathways that doubled as a shopping area. All the complex ups and downs made it commonly used in escape scenes for police dramas and it was well known but really only as being a good place to use as meeting up point.

Due to the large scale cultural festival known as the Ichihanaransai, the bus routes had been greatly changed. So that people could head to the different schools more efficiently, the routes had been specially changed to go directly from school to school. For that reason, the normally crowded bus roundabout was completely empty.

On the second floor of that multilevel overpass, Fräulein Kreutune wandered unsteadily through that concrete structure that somehow looked like a sports field, perhaps due to the plants growing here and there in an attempt to landscape the area.

"…"

A stinging pain ran across the skin of her face. It was not the pain of being scratched by fingernails or pinched on the cheek. It was a pain that felt like an electric shock and it seemed to be coming up from underneath her thin, thin skin. The pain tormented Fräulein Kreutune's consciousness like insect legs were crawling underneath her skin.

Now then.

It was often said that sharks followed the smell of blood to find their prey, but they could not accurately track anything relying on that alone. All living

creatures had bioelectricity within them. When that was scattered into the ocean water, dedicated organs could capture those slight changes in the electric current to determine the target's location.

These organs were known as the ampullae of Lorenzini.

Something similar to that had grown within Fräulein Kreutune. Even the king of the sea could only pull it off in the seawater which had exceedingly high conductivity, but she was able to do it through the air.

Technically speaking, she was not pursuing an electric current.

She was pursuing an electromagnetic signal.

She was pursuing the bioelectromagnetic information network that used the identical brainwaves of human clones.

She was pursuing the Misaka Network.

She was unable to read it. She was unable to write to it. She could only perceive the massive amount of signals traveling about as a "pressure". And she could come to a general estimate of the location of a certain special individual on that network by the rise and drop of that pressure.

In other words, she could track her target.

She could track the location of the brain belonging to the friend known as Last Order.

This was a searching method that was impossible even for the monster known as Academy City's #1 who could manipulate any vector.

Fräulein Kreutune's position had already begun to draw closer to that place.

"…Uuh…kh…"

This was of course a function she had not had before.

It was as if the fact that her body had not smelled blood or tasted flesh had led it to urge her on, prod her, and preemptively seal off the idea of giving up because she could not find her target. She wanted it that badly. She wanted that massive amount of information. She wanted the preparations she needed to eclose. She wanted to cast aside all she had been like an empty husk and to become a new life form that did not fit any of the existing categories.

It had truly just been a slight crossing of paths.

That someone had called her a friend.

And now she was going to slip out of it all and cast it aside.

"Uuh…!!"

She staggered.

That was the kind of creature Fräulein Kreutune was. She was a living being that had happened to obtain that function. Just as a plant grew when it had water and sunlight and just like ants gathered around something sweet, Fräulein Kreutune was an existence that grew more complex upon consuming information.

And so…

Was there really anything wrong with consuming it?

Was it okay to toss aside all those who tried to get in her way?

If she asked, her body would surely give her an answer. It would prepare as many functions as necessary to head to the goal point as quickly as possible. And it would then wordlessly tell her, “Give up. This is the type of creature you are, so follow the guidelines and focus solely on acquiring as much information as possible. Become an existence that does nothing but that.”

The warmer the thing she held inside of her…

And the more she felt she should focus on protecting that thing…

The more she would feel the desire to cast all of that aside. And her inability to stop herself from doing so violently burned her on the inside.

She was painfully aware that she was a lost cause.

She was exhausted.

She wondered what the point had been of all the time she had spent in the past.

No matter what functions she acquired and no matter how much she could do that others could not, she could not stop herself from doing this one simple thing. What did that make her?

She did not want to continue living.

She just wanted it all to come to an end.

She did not want to continue on in this way. She would prefer for it to just stop here. She did not care if all the meaning behind all the time she had spent and everything she had built up was sent crashing down by some strike from the side.

But it would not end.

She could not end it.

Even if she was cut. Even if she was burned. Even if she was shot or struck or crushed or stabbed or bit or hanged or buried or split or ripped or

drowned or thrown into molten lava or dried up or struck by lightning or soaked in a barrel of poison or forced between gears or fed to wild beasts.

None of the countless cruel methods that humans had used their high level of intelligence to come up with had been able to bring an end to the life form known as Fräulein Kreutune. She knew that down to the very core of her being.

"…Do you want me to bring this to an end?"

Suddenly, the monster known as Fräulein Kreutune heard someone call out to her from directly in front of her.

She slowly raised her head.

The eyeballs gazing out through the gaps in her long bangs stared at that person.

It was a girl of about 12 who had blonde hair and blue eyes.

Her blouse, miniskirt, and stockings created a contrast of black and white like a high class piano. The reason that outfit that had a certain type of classical air to it did not look out of place on that girl may have been due to the atmosphere of arrogance surrounding her.

Her name was Leivinia Birdway.

She was the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, the magic cabal that had the greatest scope and ability even in Western Europe.

"I was pursuing Gremlin, but finding you first works too."

She was a member of the magic side, but she completely ignored the unwritten treaty that existed between magic and science in order to gather information on and research the conditions behind the charismatic people and great leaders that were at the base of each culture regardless of whether they were from the magic side or the science side. She was one portion of the hidden side of the hidden side of the world.

Just by her standing there, the speed of a clock's hands could change and the blowing wind could overcome the age.

In the name of the intelligence and divinity held by her magic cabal, she could destroy basic knowledge and assumptions.

In other words…

She could even destroy the absolute conditions that prevented an end ever coming to Fräulein Kreutune no matter what.

“It seems the science side describes you as a creature that thinks using consecutive simple thoughts on the level of an insect and therefore are like the opposite of a complex AI, but we have something a bit different to say on the magic side. Of course, the fact that both sides are talking about it means neither side has come to an ultimate answer,” said Leivinia Birdway. “You are an existence with no starting point and no ending point. Or perhaps it would be better to say you have already gone all the way around an unknown number of times. Christianity is a religion that does not accept reincarnation, so they have a clear starting point and goal set. But at the same time, you can view humanity as beginning with the very first one committing a sin and being cast out of paradise and then achieving supreme happiness upon ‘returning’ to heaven. …I guess it is something similar to a marathon held in a city. At some point during the long, difficult journey, you turn around and head back to the stadium. Do you understand?” asked Birdway.

Fräulein Kreutune’s bangs swayed.

She was tilting her head in confusion.

“Perhaps you are an Adam Kadmon that left its mother’s womb before achieving clear individuality. Or perhaps you are an existence that finished learning everything and achieved optimization while inside its mother’s womb. Now you are like a Moebius strip with no front or back, but the conclusion is the same no matter what. What makes you so incredibly special as a human comes from your purity.”

“Pur…ity?”

This time, Fräulein Kreutune tilted her head at such a sharp angle that it looked like she was about to snap her own neck.

What about her was pure?

Had there ever been a creature as irrational, eerie, and unstable as her?

But Birdway continued.

“There are analogous examples in physics. For example, pure water, H20, is used in the manufacturing of semiconductors. When the water is heated up in a microwave oven, it may look like a stable liquid, but it will boil as soon as its container is shaken even slightly. You are an existence with that same strange balance.”

She was like a human that had fallen through the gaps of the theories.

In that way, Fräulein Kreutune did not really fall into the levels of complexity normally spoken of.

What she was could not be obtained at #1 or #100; it could only be obtained at the position she happened to be at.

“But the means to prevent the special behavior of pure water and to prevent it from suddenly boiling when it has been evenly heated are quite simple. Even if you are a being that cannot be fully explained from the perspective of the magic side, the techniques of the magic side are enough as long as I only need to defeat you.”

That magic cabal boss smiled.

It was a thin, thin, thin smile.

“Just adding a mere pinch of sand will turn pure water into normal water. That prevents the sudden boiling. *And that method is perfect for someone like me.*”

That may have been why organizations like the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church had been unable to handle her.

They set forth to increase the purity of mankind and viewed anyone who got in their way to be evil and their enemy. And this naturally led to their methods of attack being dyed in the shades of eliminating impurities.

Leivinia Birdway was the opposite.

She was from a modern Western magic cabal.

Those groups attempted to create new ways of valuing seemingly needless additions by taking the knowledge of the past and sublimating it to techniques leading to the future. They viewed the pure white as being nothing but a canvas. In their minds, the impurities that mixed into that were possibilities to take in new colors and create art. They refused to turn back as they attempted to create colors more wonderful than simple white.

She was one of those people, so she could do it.

She could do it using techniques those with different values viewed as being nothing but a sign of temptation and corruption.

With just a pinch of sand…

Fräulein Kreutune could be transformed into a body that could be killed.

(If my assumptions are correct, *he* should be able to do this too. Perhaps he wanted to avoid *definitively revealing* his identity even if it would allow him to kill an inconvenience to his plan.)

“What will you do?” asked Leivinia Birdway. “Obviously, I am not doing this for free. I have my own reasons. A fair amount of sacrifice was forced onto me to obtain information on that spear, after all. I will be using you as bait

to draw out that Magic God. But once that is over, you are free. *I will end it all for you if that is what you wish.*"

Fräulein Kreutune's vision wavered.

That was her reaction to having the very base of her thoughts slip away at that extraordinary possibility.

And at the same time…

It felt like something she had been holding inside came gushing out. Something seemed to run from her cheeks to her ears. A new function allowing her to easily crush a skull between her jaws and efficiently devour the brain within was showing itself on her face.

Even so, she stayed put.

She forced herself to stay put.

She made sure her opponent had a chance to attack.

And that sign displayed how she felt about the situation.

"That was plenty."

She heard the sound of something slicing through the air.

At some point a wand had appeared in Leivinia Birdway's right hand.

"Do not worry. After I blow away your arms and legs, I will freeze you in a coffin at minus 195 degrees. Even if I cannot kill you before you exhibit your special behavior, history has proven that you can be sealed away. I will preserve you like that in order to use you as bait for that Magic God."

After saying that, the magic cabal boss fell silent for a moment.

With the wand held at the ready and enough power stored within it to sever the limbs of the monster that forcibly turned aside even the power of Academy City's #1 Level 5, Birdway finally whispered something more.

Her voice was quiet.

But it was certain.

"Everything is okay now. The situation will not grow any worse."

When she heard that voice, Fräulein Kreutune's face could be seen moving slightly from where it was hidden behind her bangs.

It looked like she was smiling.

Even though she had to be imagining her ultimate fate…no, *because* she was imagining it.

As Leivinia Birdway looked at her dead on, she cast aside all emotion to carry out this final attack perfectly.

And…

Just before she could…

Some giant object fell right between Fräulein Kreutune and Leivinia Birdway.

As previously explained, the multilevel overpass had several levels between the road on the top level and the underground passageways. If one jumped from the road up top, that phenomenon was possible without needing to fly.

And the person who had done so was someone who had once betrayed Leivinia Birdway.

It was someone who always ended up in the middle of the world's conflicts whether he liked it or not thanks to the special power residing in his right hand.

It was a spiky-haired boy.

It was a small hero who would become anyone's ally.

"Hey, Birdway. How about we fight and make up?"

It was Kamijou Touma.

Even though he was always surrounded by misfortune he would always stand in the way of anyone else's misfortune.

It did not matter how injured he was.

It did not matter if he had been betrayed, deceived, and shot in the side.

He would always raise his right hand to protect someone else.

Part 3

"Why?" muttered Misaka Mikoto as she toyed with her hair on the road at the top level.

It might have been due to the unique population distribution of the Ichihanaransai or it might have been due to someone setting up some kind of trick, but the amount of traffic had disappeared to an unnatural extent.

"Why do I have to go along with what you say? Are you seriously asking a girl to help you in a fight? Come to think of it, I can't think of a single reason I have to go along with this."

The asphalt continued on and on and on like a runway.

Someone stood further down the road.

She had white feathers decorating her hair. She wore a short dress with pants forcibly worn underneath, a bulletproof vest, and protectors covering her elbows and knees. It gave her the silhouette of armor. And on top of it all, she had an unnaturally large sword called a claymore hanging down from her hand. It looked like she was holding one of the steel sheets used in construction.

As she walked, the tip of the sword…or rather, the "corner" audibly scraped across the surface of the asphalt.

Her name was Brunhild Eiktobel.

Without even trying to hide her killer intent or aggression, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman asked a question in a flat voice.

"Are you my enemy?"

"It's kind of hard to say."

Mikoto then heard a voice from behind her.

She was standing back to back with the Lightning God Thor who was in charge of direct combat within Gremlin.

He was facing a different enemy.

"C'mon, Miko-chan."

"I told you not to call me that! Who the hell are you anyway!?"

"*They* have formed a group to beat the shit out of Kamijou Touma, who has already been shot in the side, and then abduct a woman named Fräulein Kreutune before his eyes. And they'll be whispering to Fräulein Kreutune that she'll be happiest if they use her for their purposes and then kill her. So what do you think, Miko-chan? Do you approve of that? Do you oppose it? Or will you take the clever route and just look away? *Which side do you want to stand on?*"

"…"

Mikoto sighed.

With an annoyed tone in her voice, she said, "So it's the same pattern as always."

"Now you're catching on."

"I guess he hasn't changed at all even after disappearing in Hawaii and heading to that Baggage City place."

“I heard that was a horrible battlefield, but it seems he still managed to save some lives. I have no room to talk…in fact, you could say I’m just as much to blame…but Kamijou Touma is trying to finish things with the person you could call the primary cause of all this. Will you support him? Or will you get in his way?”

“Tch.”

There was plenty she wanted to say.

But Mikoto just gave up and lightly clicked her tongue.

She did so because she had seen it. She had seen the look of anguish on a certain boy’s face after the incident in Hawaii had come to an end and he had realized he had been made to act for someone else’s purposes. He had fought, struggled, had some coincidences work in his favor, and had finally managed to reach a place where he could bring an end to the string of nightmares for which he had pulled the trigger himself. This was a one-of-a-kind situation that would never come again if he let it escape him here.

So now what should Mikoto do?

No, what did she *want* to do?

She did not even hesitate.

Bluish-white sparks flew from her bangs.

She slowly turned back to face Brunhild Eiktobel who was still approaching.

“You owe me one.”

“Shouldn’t you be saying that to Kamijou-kun?”

“It’s embarrassing, so I’m saying it here where he can’t hear me.”

With a slight smile, Thor turned around to face his enemy as well.

His enemy was Silvia. She was one of the fewer than 20 Saints in the world as well as an elite who was one of the highest ranked of the royal maids who doubled as shrine maidens and bodyguards for the British Royal Family. She was not wearing a traditional and elegant maid uniform. She wore work pants, a work apron, and goggles in a way that looked “somehow like” a maid uniform. A smile that could be viewed as lively appeared on her face.

“How about we get this started?” she asked.

“Sorry. It looks like I kept you waiting.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I got to see something wonderful, so I’m satisfied. …And it really was wonderful. I wish I had been on your side this time.”

“It’s not too late.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t.”

The sound of something slicing through the air could be heard.

It was coming from a long, long bundle of rope in Silvia’s hand.

“I am jealous, but surely you understand that this is not a situation where I can act based on my own personal desires.”

“My enemy certainly is pathetic.”

“Hearing that is painful. The sad thing about maids is that we can’t fight for honor like a king or a knight.”

A conflict could not be avoided.

That battle between the powerful would spread destruction around the area whether they liked it or not.

But if it could be contained to this one area that was nearly deserted, it would at least be better than the worst case scenario where the situation covered multiple areas of the city simultaneously, even those causing the damage had no idea who was getting caught in the middle of it all, and the overall scope was unknown.

“Mjölnir… Perform final connection check. Once it is done, begin supply.”

As soon as Thor muttered those words, the color of his eyes changed.

Literally.

His hair and fingertips began emitting a pale bluish-white light. It looked like St. Elmo’s fire floating around a ship’s mast during a storm at sea. Unlike before, Thor’s power was being drastically raised by someone other than himself.

Silvia whistled.

“I see. So you normally use it like that.”

“Don’t try to say this isn’t fair. You also have two sources of power as both a Saint and a royal maid.”

As he spoke, Thor lightly waved his right hand.

Beams of light similar to arc fusion blades were emitted from his fingertips.

And they grew to 10 meters right away.

Ignoring the explosive noise of the air being roasted, Thor opened his mouth to speak. He had a look of disinterest on his face despite drawing out enough firepower to level a building just by waving his hand like he was shooing away an insect.

And this was just a fragment of his power.

This was nothing but an experiment to see just how far his power had been raised.

“Let’s finish this quickly. I doubt a fight with someone as pathetic as you will be any fun at all.”

Part 4

Accelerator and Kakine Teitoku.

Those two were the top ranking monsters created by Academy City and known as the city’s #1 and #2. They now faced off in the underground passageways at the bottommost level of the multilevel overpass.

Their conflict did not center on Fräulein Kreutune.

They did not have some grand reason for being there such as protecting the city, protecting world peace, or supporting or stopping someone’s conspiracy.

So were they acting based on personal emotions such as hatred?

A woman Accelerator knew had almost been killed thanks to a surprise attack carried out by Kakine Teitoku, and the violence created when Accelerator gave into his anger had crushed Kakine Teitoku’s entire body and driven him to the edge of death.

But that was not enough to explain it all.

What was down at the root of it all?

They gazed at each other, stared at each other, and carefully observed each other.

While holding his modern cane, Accelerator spat out, “Pathetic.”

“Is that so?” was Kakine Teitoku’s surprisingly honest response.

It was a bit unclear if that boy could really be said to be Kakine Teitoku himself since over half of his internal organs had been swapped out and

even the color of the skin covering his body had changed to something inhuman.

"It's simple. It really is simple. I was forced to do a lot of things while I was hidden deep underground. It was all humiliating, but I gained quite a bit too. And thanks to that I can use my own power to gather everything I lack. This is something that I did not have before. It is a brand new inspiration. And, well, now I'm curious. I'm so curious I just have to know."

It sounded like he was whispering.

It sounded like he was making an appeal.

"*How far have I come?*"

Kakine Teitoku asked an honest question with the same look on his face as someone who had been deprived of all their special privileges by dropping out of a dark side organization yet had been freed from all sorts of bonds at the same time.

"*How far can my Dark Matter go in this world?*"

There were tons of things he wanted to try out. There were more items he wished to attempt than there were stars in the sky. But the one issue he had to take care of first overpowered the rest.

That is, had Kakine Teitoku surpassed Accelerator?

Nothing could begin without resolving that issue and everything would be over once it had been resolved.

But…

That was exactly why the #1 only had that one word to say.

Pathetic.

"If you really had prepared everything you lacked, you wouldn't still be stuck on that issue."

What did one gain by taking an Academy City esper power to its extreme?

What did one gain by defeating someone and claiming their throne for oneself?

Those powers were nothing but a means…nothing but a tool.

He had managed to survive the full brunt of Accelerator's out-of-control attack, searched with all his might for a means of regaining his freedom after being hidden underground, and had ultimately gained a new ability not even Accelerator had that allowed him to regenerate his body and manufacture his own organs.

He had come so far and yet the monster known as Kakine Teitoku had not found anyone he wished to protect.

What if…

What if he had found just one person to protect?

Even if it was pitiable and unsightly, what if he had viewed a wider world and obtained that?

Academy City's #2 monster might have been able to take his overwhelming and sinister violence and turn it into nothing more than a power.

"I've had enough of this," spat out Accelerator in a tone of disappointment. "You may have worked out a strategy, made your preparations, waited for the opportune timing, and accounted for any nightmarish coincidences…but it's no use. The way you are now isn't even worth testing against me. You're just overwhelmingly pathetic."

"Don't say that," declared Kakine Teitoku with a thin, thin smile on his lips. "Those conditions you were talking about didn't mention the location. The location can be very important. I made sure to wait for you here. Yes, that's right. Let me say it again: the location can be very important."

"What?"

"Does this place bring back any memories? Or do you not even remember anymore? I suppose it was just one among many. With how overboard you went back then, it isn't too surprising you wouldn't remember every little one."

Accelerator did not recognize the place.

For one thing, he had only fought Kakine Teitoku that one time during the conflict between the dark side organizations of Group, School, and Item. That had been enough to decide the victor between the #1 and #2. But that battle's stage had not been in an underground passageway.

However, Kakine Teitoku continued speaking.

He spoke clearly and confidently.

"Do you really not remember? You really are a heartless bastard. *You took so very many lives yet you don't even bother to remember them?*"

Something like a small thorn stabbed into Accelerator's mind.

But it was too late.

Kakine Teitoku who controlled Academy City's #2 Level 5 power of Dark Matter took his next action.

“Ha ha! This was one of those stages! This was one of the stages for those repeated experiments where you massacred human clones while going on about being the strongest or invincible or whatever!!”

“You don’t mean…!!” shouted Accelerator as he recalled that Kakine Teitoku had the power to create anything that was lacking.

But the change had already begun.

Some white substance that could not be called a liquid or a solid suddenly spread out in every direction from where Kakine Teitoku stood. The substance’s surface undulated, rose up, and took on new form.

Accelerator knew that form very well.

The form was modeled off of the clones who were themselves modeled off of a certain girl.

The Sisters.

The people Accelerator had once killed during those cruel experiments. They symbolized his sins.

He could tell his vision was growing unsteady. He could not stop it.

Several girls with the exact same face tilted their heads in puzzlement, stared at their hands, moved their eyes that held little emotion, and otherwise checked on their situation.

And their lips moved.

They moved.

“Misaka has encountered the food known as ramen. The best type is tonkotsu with thin noodles, analyzes Misaka.”

“No, no. Shio ramen with soft noodles is the true delicacy. Does Misaka have to kick your ass? asks Misaka as she grabs your collar.”

“Don’t you dare confuse shio ramen with shio butter ramen, says Misaka as she joins the fray to prove which is the best.”

It was so out of place.

The way those expressionless girls lightly hit at each other while inadvertently revealing their midriffs and flipping up their skirts wore horribly at Accelerator’s nerves.

They were not just dolls.

They breathed, had a pulse, and had the warmth of life just like any other person.

And he had…

He had…

"Oh, it isn't like these are *actually them.*"

The innocent scuffle suddenly ended as if some switch had been thrown.

Their heads turned and the emotionless camera lenses of their eyes stared directly at Accelerator.

Something huge had forcibly interfered to make them ignore their individual beliefs.

It was as if…

As if some kind of experiment had begun.

"Not even I can fix someone that has completely died. Nor can I make something completely identical to them," said Kakine Teitoku with a grin. It was the type of grin that would never have appeared on his face had he obtained what he truly needed. "This is why I chose this location. I suppose you could call it 'residual thought'. At any rate, I have taken in all the information remaining in these areas and given them shape. There are plenty of ways to read thoughts, but for me it's like a record or a CD. I run Dark Matter across the tiny ups and downs on the surfaces of materials to obtain the information. The event that once happened here left its mark in ways too tiny for the eye to see. The record of those vibrations allows me to replay their final moments."

They were nothing but imitations.

It was like replaying a recorded scream over and over again.

But the original sound was real.

Ultimately, it was real.

Even if they were being used for someone else's purposes and even if they were being led around in an unsightly fashion. Those girls had not been registered by the government, no notification of death was issued for them, they had no grave or remains, and even the recordings on security devices such as cameras and sensors had been completely eliminated. Not only had they been given an irrational death, but no evidence that they had ever even lived remained. This was truly the very, very last proof of their existence.

Could he really destroy that?

Even if he had the power to do so, was it right for him to do so?

After all, he was Accelerator, the one who had ruthlessly robbed those girls of their lives with his own hands.

Could he really erase the only remaining piece of evidence of them in the entire world?

"Heh heh. *Looks like it's actually working.*"

The #2 smiled, and smiled, and smiled.

He spread violence on a level befitting of one who was still a monster.

"Academy City esper powers are controlled using high level calculation ability. Even if you don't normally think of it that way, you are still carrying out complex calculations without knowing it. Throwing that out of order can be quite useful. *There's no harm in starting with that, don't you think?*"

"You…"

Even all this was just the "start".

He was merely casually testing it out.

"Now then, will you lose the conditions needed for your reflection? Or will you bring out those much, much more insane wings? However this goes, I'm looking forward to it. I do hope you at least make this worthy of testing out my ability!"

"Why yooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu…!!"

Part 5

Kamijou Touma stared directly at Leivinia Birdway.

But even as he did, the one he was truly "facing" was Fräulein Kreutune.

"Are you going to die to bring it all to an end?"

"I…"

"I don't know who your friend is. I don't know what exactly it is you're dealing with. But you can't be serious. If you can't bear to lose your friend, you can't seriously want to give that same pain to your friend."

"…"

“There is someone who wants to protect you just as much as you want to protect them. There is someone who does not want to see you hurt just as much as you don’t want to see them hurt.”

His enemy was powerful and he could not take his eyes off her for an instant.

That was why Kamijou spoke with his back to Fräulein Kreutune.

“So don’t be so ready to say you want to die!! If you live, struggle, and suffer, then you can find it!! You can find the path to an ending in which everyone is smiling! It can’t just be about you. It has to be about this person you want to protect so much, too!!”

He could not continue speaking any longer.

Leivinia Birdway had silently begun to move.

It looked like all she had done was slightly wave the wand she was holding.

But in reality, the wand had turned into a sword at some point and an overwhelming gust of wind was created. It cut in between Kamijou and Fräulein Kreutune, and it completely sliced apart the giant overpass that looked like a sports arena.

With the point of the slice as the edge, the overpass tilted along one of its supports like a seesaw. Kamijou and Birdway slid down to ground level.

“…What a fool,” said Birdway as if spitting out the words. “Fräulein Kreutune is not a human like you think she is. I don’t know if she was lacking something at birth or if she gained this strange behavior by possessing too much, but everything down to her basic construction is beyond our understanding.”

“Is that so?” cut in Kamijou casually. And he continued further. “She may work on some complicated theory or some difficult to understand reasoning, but all I see is a girl desperately trying to protect her friend. All I see is a girl who has been putting up with so much pain for so long as she tries to endure and hold on so she is not swept away, and has ultimately decided it is easy to make excuses and just give up on everything.”

“…”

“And that’s all I need. The conflict between Gremlin and Ollerus’s group over her? The final piece to make some kind of special spear? …I don’t care about any of that. There is a girl before me who is seriously considering some ridiculous idea of throwing away her own life to save a friend! There is no possible reason to not reach out to help her!!”

As he shouted, Kamijou recalled what Thor had once said in a certain fast food restaurant.

My enemy certainly has become pathetic.

(That's right.)

Kamijou finally understood what he had meant. Not doing even the things he could do out of a fear of failure was not his way of doing things. He may have been deceived, used, and unwittingly led around, but he had still had a small power back then. Even if all he could do was run down the rails someone else had prepared, he could still desperately stretch out his hand to grab hold of someone else's hand.

What did it matter who won in the grand scheme of things?

What good was a decision made while only looking to the distant future?

Did he want to become someone who spent so much time looking at the big picture that he did not even notice that his giant feet were trampling others?

"I heard what she said. She may have been muttering about functions and eating brains, but I distinctly heard it. She said she doesn't want to eat that brain. And so I made *my decision.* Wanting to lend a helping hand is human nature."

"What if those words were nothing but an imitation?"

Birdway's sharp, coldhearted words seemed to stab into Kamijou.

These were the words of an enemy.

She was truly trying to crush the core of Kamijou Touma's being.

"You are mistaken. You are mistaken about the core of this issue. You are mistaken in your belief that Fräulein Kreutune has a mind like you do and that it functions in the same way as yours."

"What?"

"This is not an issue of good and evil or liking and disliking. Fräulein Kreutune is fundamentally different from us."

Birdway lightly swung her sword.

At some point, it had transformed into a cup.

"She is a creature that only appears to think. That is what she is now and that is what she was when her name was recorded in the historical documents. She has always been like that."

That living creature did not possess the function to carry out complex thoughts or to have deep emotions well up within her chest.

She merely made repeated “thoughts” that were even more simplified than those of an insect. It was similar to the thought processes that a robot not equipped with a complex AI used to control its actions and make decisions.

Cool places were better than hot places.

Warm places were better than cold places.

By repeating those decisions with only two possible answers one after another, she could continue to find the easiest environment to live in even without great intelligence or experience.

Eating sweet things was better than eating bitter things.

Choosing bright places was better than choosing dark places.

Wearing soft cloth was better than wearing hard cloth.

When thousands and tens of thousands of those simple decisions were made, that living creature was able live in the optimal spot, eat the optimal foods, and wear the optimal clothes. As she continually moved farther and farther in the more comfortable direction, the living creature came across a certain decision.

It was related to the living creatures known as humans.

Would she mimic them or not?

The living creature made her decision, but she failed. She went to live in a certain village, but she was too sturdy. This fact harmed no one, but it was enough for the people to treat her as something strange and different.

Even as she was thrown into a cell and treated as a witch, she continued her simple decisions.

Yes.

The living creature decided mimicking the people around her and behaving so that she would gain the benefits of a village was the ideal path to live comfortably.

The kind priest said…

To repeat, that living creature did not possess the function of complex thought or the function for deep emotions to fill her heart.

She only had the function to constantly make simple decisions regarding the phenomena before her eyes in order to advance in the more comfortable direction.

So…

The kind priest said…

Where did that image of the smiling woman in those old documents come from? Where was that woman who smiled and insisted she was but a mere human despite not shedding a single drop of blood while being thoroughly tormented in countless tortures and executions?

The answer was simple.

She had of course done nothing but carry out her simple decisions.

In that cell, she had observed the other women who had been rejected by the village and unreasonably convicted as witches. And she had mimicked their behavior.

I am a normal human.

I am most certainly not an evil witch.

Her surprisingly pure eyes had simply observed the women who had continued to insist that in their final moments.

That was the type of creatures she was.

That was just what Fräulein Kreutune was.

She had not spoken those things because she had thought them.

She had not insisted her uninjured state meant she was human because she had believed in the trials by ordeal.

It was nothing but simple decisions.

Nothing but yes or no.

A chain of zeros and ones.

It just so happened that her behavior had made it appear she thought like other humans and felt emotions like other humans. If it had not been a human village before her back then but a pack of lions, she would likely have tried to obtain the benefits of that group by mimicking those wild beasts.

The truth was much too simple and it was that simplicity that caused a chill to run down the back of those that heard it.

“When you get down to it,” said Birdway as she narrowed her eyes and toyed with the cup in her hand, “there is nothing inside of her. No matter how many words she uses and no matter how much she clenches her teeth

and holds back tears, there is no real driving force within her. That is just the kind of creature Fräulein Kreutune is. …How can you believe someone like that? The human heart can seal away 'functions'. But she has no real 'mind' so she is a slave to them. If the pattern of those simple decisions…of those zeros and ones changes just slightly, she will unhesitatingly eat the brain of someone she had previously thought of as a friend. And it is all nothing but her simple thoughts leading her in the more comfortable direction."

But…

"I believe her," instantly replied Kamijou Touma despite hearing all that.

Even Birdway showed a tinge of surprise at that.

Kamijou continued, "If the ultimate answer a living creature comes to with its simple decisions meant to find the optimal decision is that she doesn't want to hurt her friend, it doesn't matter what process led to that decision. If she is the type of human that can come to such a kind answer, then I can believe in Fräulein Kreutune."

"Are you saying you could even grow emotionally attached to a doll made of metal and plastic that's expressions are controlled by a program!? Are you saying you are going to protect something that only has the appearance of a human even after you have been shot in the side!?"

"Yes. If something that smiles like a human, cries like a human, is considerate of others like a human, and tries to protect others like a human is about to be scrapped, then I will clench my fist. It doesn't matter what she's made of or what the inner workings of her head are. She isn't a monster or something strange and different. I'm much more frightened by people who have a brain that can understand others properly but still enjoy deceiving and hurting others."

"…"

But this was not just a hypothetical issue.

Kamijou had met quite a few people with complex circumstances surrounding them. He had met a girl created from an aggregation of AIM diffusion fields and he had met those who made up a network of human clones where the whole could influence the individual and the individual could influence the whole.

But what did that matter?

Did the fact that they had a different construction or makeup mean there was something fundamentally different about who they were?

How was it human to abandon them for that reason?

“And it was because you feel the same that you did not attack Fräulein Kreutune right away, wasn’t it?” said Kamijou as a challenge. His voice held conviction. “You stood before her and spoke to her despite knowing the base of her thoughts was fundamentally different from your own. Why did you treat her like an equal? Wasn’t that because you were taking Fräulein Kreutune’s heart into consideration!?”

“Silence.”

A large amount of water appeared around Birdway. It swirled around creating a wall that completely surrounded her.

With cold eyes, that magic cabal boss held out the symbolic weapon controlling water.

“Even if she does have a heart that is just of a different type from our own, that does not change what must be done. To destroy Gremlin, the production of that spear must be stopped. If I prove I can do that, the one looking down from the center of that group will make her move. It took a lot of sacrifice to acquire this information. I must lure out the Magic God Othinus and crush her. That takes top priority.”

“So it comes down to that in the end,” muttered Kamijou as he clenched his fist once more. “But Birdway, you are probably going about this the wrong way.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Even if you defeat Othinus by sacrificing Fräulein Kreutune and even if Gremlin completely falls apart without that mental support, taking this quickest and shortest path by deceiving and hurting everyone will only create mutual distrust and suspicion. There is no point in this if you and your Dawn-Colored Sunlight just become more of a monster than Gremlin. For the world and the people you want to protect, *this will only change the name of their enemy.* This will never bring about peaceful days. And so,” said Kamijou without allowing his words to come to an end. “Let’s end this. I will stop you here so your determination does not lead to such a horrible conclusion and so that the role of the ultimate villain is not forced onto you!!”

Part 6

In the underground passageways at the lowest level of the multilevel overpass, girls with the same faces as the ones Accelerator had once killed…or rather, something white that had taken their form…charged towards Accelerator. They moved as quickly as a motorcycle and they occasionally kicked off the walls or pillars to maintain their attack course. This was of course something the original girls could not have done. But it was still something Accelerator could easily imagine.

If the Sisters had gained bodies made of Dark Matter, they very well might have chosen precisely that sort of strategy.

(Goddamn you…!)

His vision wavered. He could feel a prickling pain at the back of his head.

He instantly carried out the calculations to control the necessary vectors in the scene before his eyes. He perfectly grasped the movements of those girls who kept low as if sliding across the floor, circled around outside his vision, or kicked off of a pillar to attack from above.

He managed that, but he was not able to counterattack.

In a move that was truly rare for Academy City's #1 monster, he simply moved his body aside to evade the attacks. He took action to just barely escape the range of those slender arms swinging from various directions at once.

He was not afraid of being hit by their attacks.

As they were made of Dark Matter, it was true that their fists had become blunt weapons heavier than large hammers that could easily destroy a human face. And their fingernails could rip apart their prey more easily than a pair of wire cutters that could easily slice through wires as thick as a finger.

But…

He did not evade because he was afraid of having his own body torn apart.

It was quite the opposite.

He was afraid his own reflection would smash their arms and legs.

Of course, this was not a situation in which he could take such a half-hearted stance.

Kakine Teitoku held his right hand out in front of him from where he stood a bit away.

“You are full of openings.”

A great roar exploded out.

Kakine Teitoku’s entire pure white arm turned into a giant wing. The countless feathers that made up that wing turned into sharp blades. They shot out explosively. Or more accurately, they stretched out like spears with tremendous force, bent in places, and simultaneously attacked Accelerator from many different angles all around him.

They did not even bother slipping through the gaps between the Sisters.

The spears easily pierced straight through the girls.

Accelerator was unable to evade in time and his shaken thoughts were unable to fully implement his reflection. One of the spears tore a shallow wound along the top of his shoulder. Accelerator’s body was thrown through the air in a tailspin. He just barely managed to avoid collapsing to the ground and instead landed on the tips of his toes. Only then did he comprehend the terrible scene before him.

They were like insects.

They were like insects stuck to the wall with long, narrow, and very sharp pins.

“Ah…”

He heard a strange squirming noise.

It was the sound of those things shaped like the Sisters repeatedly carrying out their predetermined actions despite having being held motionlessly in midair thanks to being pierced through the torso, arms, legs, or even neck. They made no cries of pain and their faces were not distorted in fear. They did not even realize they had been disposed of. Those hopeless dolls merely continued to faithfully carry out their master’s orders.

Accelerator’s face writhed ominously at what he saw.

No matter how hard he tried to suppress it, he could not help but remember. He remembered those girls who had once been treated like experimental animals as Academy City’s strongest monster unhesitatingly devoured them.

“You motherfuckeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!”

His vision grew dizzied.

If Kakine Teitoku was going to toy with him, *Accelerator would do to him what he had once done to them.*

But then Accelerator saw Kakine Teitoku draw in the countless spears extending from him. The white girls held in place by them once more regained freedom. As if to hold that monster in check, they moved in to attack while dragging their broken bodies along.

"I did a lot of research on you. After all, I had more than enough time to think," said the #2 monster with a smile. "It's no good. *Your method* just won't work. …Sure, it looks like you have atoned for what you did. The host model that holds the overall will of the Misaka Network has forgiven you. But that does not mean you have been completely forgiven. And I'm sure you know that fact very well."

"…!!"

As he was unable to defeat or even attack them, Accelerator merely continued to evade.

"After all, you view the Sisters as having an aggregate whole in the Misaka Network but you also seem to think the individual personalities of each terminal must be recognized. So the overall will has accepted you? So what? *Only the one who was killed can understand the feelings of the one who was killed.* If you think about it, it should be obvious."

He tore at Accelerator with his words.

He dug into him.

He thought he had cut off all forms of airborne vibrations, but whether he liked it or not, that voice that was filled with true malice tugged at him, pried open his mind, forcefully slipped inside, and stabbed into his heart. Those thorns he could not pull out robbed him of his composure bit by bit. The equations that controlled his great power fell into disarray.

"And there is no longer any way for you to determine whether you have truly been forgiven."

Accelerator was surrounded by Kakine Teitoku's trick.

He was trapped in a cage made up of gentle words.

"The final piece that might be able to tell you what those you killed thought is this. These final pieces of personal information to remain in this world. But…does it really matter? If you crush them, destroy them, and send them into eternal darkness, your sins will disappear. Suspicions go unpunished. If it is something no one can ever know, then there's no problem, is there? And then you can return to your peaceful world with all the loose ends tied up."

Accelerator's consciousness had been thrown into such disarray that he could barely grasp the words being spoken.

And Kakine Teitoku's gentle voice tore at his nerves some more.

"But anyway…"

He was so filled with anger that he almost lost his balance. And only when he was truly cornered there did he finally realize something. Not only was he unable to control his power, but he was not even properly carrying out the calculations; he barely even noticed anymore that he needed to stand and walk on his own two feet thanks to his injured brain.

"Be crushed by the symbol of your own sins and die, you worm."

The white girls with the same form as the Sisters rushed in to take advantage of that opportunity. Countless arms that rivaled large hammers and wire cutters shot towards him all at once.

It was all over.

Or it should have been.

However…

A tremendous beam of light suddenly broke through the wall and blew away one of the white girls.

This scene occurred right in front of Accelerator who had hesitated to hurt his opponents despite the great danger he was in.

He looked dumbfounded.

He felt like his thoughts had been roasted with the color white.

A face peered in through the large hole in the wall that was glowing orange around the edge. The face naturally belonged to a monster the city had created with cutting edge technology just like Accelerator and Kakine Teitoku.

She was Mugino Shizuri.

She was Academy City's #4. She was the girl also known as Meltdowner.

The appearance of this new threat caused the white girls to stop their attack and change their formation to deal with an attack from both sides.

Mugino ignored them and spoke in an annoyed tone.

"Come on now, #1. If you want to die, then just get it over with. It pisses me off to have to wait my turn. As you can see, I blew one of them away, but don't get too upset. It's your own fault for taking so long against something like this."

Accelerator felt a scorching pain in his head. It led him to shout out.

"You…!!"

"Don't get pissed at me, little monster. You know you're pointing that in the wrong direction, don't you?" Mugino lightly waved her index finger made from cutting edge technology and continued. "*Only the one who was killed can understand the feelings of the one who was killed.* He's right about that. But residual thought given shape? A phonograph replaying their final moments? Who cares? It isn't actually them. He's just making a human model by putting clay over the bones of a corpse."

"…"

"There may be people out there who can truly imagine how the dead feel and shed tears based on it. There may be people who find something the dead left behind and finish it in their place. There may be people who save the dead in that way, but that is not something people like us who killed others while soaked in evil can do. There is nothing we can do," said Mugino.

That last comment seemed to stab at Accelerator.

But she did not stop there.

"The dead cannot be brought back to life no matter what technology is used. Just speaking from the viewpoint of CPR, *someone whose heart has stopped and someone who is clearly dead are two very different things.* …You must live in quite the naïve world if you fell for something as simple as this. Did you think someone you had killed might come back to life? Did you think the crime of killing them might be cancelled out if that happened? Were you living while holding that hope inside?"

It had happened just before dawn.

The dark side of Academy City had attacked Mugino Shizuri using someone who looked exactly like Frenda Seivelun. When that had happened, her emotions had not prevented her from unhesitatingly crushing that enemy with her Meltdowner.

The dead could not be brought back to life.

Only the one who had been killed could speak of the feelings of the one who had been killed. Or at the very least, someone who had sullied their hands in the darkness could never speak of them.

What if…

What if something that looked just like them was set up and someone still living used it to put words in the dead's mouth for their own purposes?

That would be desecrating the dead.

That was the lowest method possible that even a sinner could get angry at.

“I read the reports about you and those clones,” said Mugino readily. “It was almost cute compared to me *who killed for no reason at all.* You still have some room for complicated and convoluted excuses. You’re probably still going to hell just as much as I am, but there may be some things you can do before you go there. …So what will you do? If you want to fool yourself into thinking you’re actually facing the dead and let them kill you as revenge, that’s fine by me. If you want to retrieve the dead’s dignity and peaceful rest from the bastard who dug up their bones and added flesh to them for his own amusement, that’s fine by me too. It’s your pathetic life. Do whatever the hell you want.”

“I know…” The words slipped out of Accelerator’s clenched teeth as if he was trying to crush them. “I know that. I know I’m just licking my own wounds. I know they only look like the real thing because I’m superimposing my own wounds over them. But even so…”

It was as if Accelerator was opening up his own wounds and letting dark blood flow out.

He was choosing to touch his own greatest pain.

“That is…They are the final proof that those I killed ever existed. No matter how horrible a method they are being used for, they are still the final evidence that the lives I stole were ever here!!”

“…That’s all the more reason,” spat out Mugino. “You say that is all there is left. You say that is the entirety of what lives on of someone. Well, all of that has been stolen and is being used and controlled. If that is acceptable…*if you – not the dead – find that to be acceptable*, then just let yourself be killed like the loser you are. I’ll finish everything afterwards.”

She was not saying all this in order to warn him of the path he was taking.

With the path she had walked down, she was certainly not qualified to do that.

“Don’t think you can end this without getting your hands dirty.”

Even so, something did sit well with her.

And so she spoke.

“*You have to dirty your hands to give the dead a clean end.* Only the one killed can know how the one killed feels, but only the living can act based on their feelings for the dead. …Rejecting that and running away is not being honest or being a pacifist. It is being a coward.”

"…Ah."

In truth, he knew that.

Even if he was injured, collapsed pathetically to the ground, and had his life taken here, the dead no longer existed, so they would think nothing of it one way or the other. The whole reason killing was such a taboo was because it robbed people of even that basic function.

He just needed resolve.

He needed to bring new doubt to what was supporting the very base of his psyche.

Even if the overall will of the Misaka Network had accepted him…

Even if the special unit known as Last Order had forgiven him…

That did not mean it was over.

But…

That was no reason to abandon those dead who were now being used as playthings.

"…I will destroy them," muttered Accelerator. Great power entered his voice. "*It'll be all right.* If you need something to prove you existed, I will be that remnant. I will dig deeply into this world to leave behind an indelible mark that will prove that you were here as the ones who were sacrificed to the monster that I am. These twisted records are no longer needed. I just have to return you to a place *where the dark side of science like me can't reach you.* I will end it all!!"

"Oh?"

Finally, Kakine Teitoku opened his mouth after listening in with a thin smile.

He could have violently interfered at any time, but he chose to simply watch.

Like the audience that began speaking amongst themselves as soon as the play ended and the theatre lights came on.

"Is that how you're going to accept it? Only the one killed can know how the one killed feels, so you're just going to claim you don't need to know and stop thinking about it?"

"You would never understand. You are the type who puts words in the dead's mouth for your own benefit and never faces how you feel about the dead yourself. They say not even death can cure an idiot. Well, it looks like

nothing can cure you of being pathetic. You're powerful, but you're pathetic. It might have been better for you if you had just died back then. That way you could have ended life as the high level esper that defeated me, the #4. But you didn't know to quit when you were ahead, and now you're going to lose even that."

Mugino's tone was one of disinterest.

An oddly bright light grew from her palm.

"And it isn't like I don't have my own reasons to be here. I was attacked by a false Frenda last night. You were the biggest factor of the darkness active at that time and the interest in playing with the dead was the same. I don't know what your purpose in that was, but I'm going to make you pay for *disturbing her grave*, you piece of shit."

The #1 and the #4 specialized in destruction.

The #2 had the ability to eternally create.

Those monsters had split into two groups and glared at each other. The battle began in the very next moment.

Part 7

On the road at the top level of the multilevel overpass that had *an unnatural* absence of cars, Misaka Mikoto and Brunhild Eiktobel faced each other.

This too may have been a historic moment.

On one side was Misaka Mikoto the Railgun, one of the top ranked espers created by the science side.

On the other side was Brunhild Eiktobel who possessed the innate characteristics of a Saint that were exceedingly rare even on the magic side.

They were about to clash.

For a battle that was brought about by coincidence, it threatened to have great effects to both the magic side and science side.

However, the battle was overwhelmingly one-sided.

Academy City espers may have possessed quite a bit of power, but Brunhild Eiktobel possessed the rare qualities of a Christian Saint. And on top of that, she also possessed the rare qualities of a Norse Valkyrie. The two abilities worked against each other and the upper limit of her power changed over a

set period like the waxing and waning of the moon. However, she did not currently appear to be having any problems related to that.

And there was a problem that came before trivial differences in power.

Brunhild Eiktobel could reach a top speed that exceeded the speed of sound.

And she brought out that top speed from the very first step.

By the time the explosive noise rang out, it was already too late.

From the perspective of one's bodily senses, Brunhild seemed to just disappear. And since she was moving faster than sound, one could never react in time based on sound.

Brunhild Eiktobel charged up to a point right in front of Mikoto and vigorously swung up the claymore hanging down from one hand.

She also twisted her wrist to lay the giant sword down flat as she swung it.

Normally, this may have been an attempt to not hit one's opponent with the blade of the sword. However, the situation here was different. Brunhild Eiktobel could move at supersonic speeds and the claymore she held was like a giant sword made by attaching a grip to a metal sheet.

By laying the blade flat, she could use it like a giant fan made of steel.

An overwhelmingly violent fan that used the massive shockwave created when an object moved at supersonic speeds.

That would end it.

Not only would it crush the girl's fat and muscles from the outside, but her eardrums, lungs, and trachea would rupture from within.

However…

"Damn you!!"

"!?"

She reacted just before it hit.

A dull noise came from below their feet. The ground below moved. The road at the top of the overpass was made in blocks that included the supports below. The girl controlled one entire block with magnetism to tilt it like a seesaw.

This caused Brunhild's aim to be off with her claymore strike and the sonic boom flew off into the distance. All the glass in one of the buildings alongside the road was smashed to pieces.

(A broad-use electric type? So did she use some kind of radar? No, this is…!!)

Iron sand had been thinly spread all across the road surface.

Even if Brunhild Eiktobel's movements exceeded the limits of the girl's kinetic vision, she could clearly see what path Brunhild had taken thanks to her footprints.

And Misaka Mikoto did not stop there.

She snapped her fingers and shouted, "Be swallowed up!!"

The iron sand rose up in every direction.

It all began vibrating at high speed to create a storm of killer needles and then shot towards Brunhild Eiktobel from all 360 degrees around her.

Brunhild grabbed her giant claymore with both hands and swung it around in a full circle like she was performing a giant swing.

The explosive roar came slightly after the fact.

The air was agitated at tremendous speed and that deadly swarm that was being controlled by great magnetic power was struck by the even more tremendous power of the sonic boom created. The iron sand lost its form and was blown away.

Mikoto escaped the shockwave by controlling the rebar in the overpass road to create a thick wall of concrete in front of her. She used magnetism to once more gather the scattered iron sand and check on her next target.

"That sword!!"

Brunhild Eiktobel was aiming for Mikoto's neck with her claymore, but the sword stopped in midair.

But once again it did not last even a second.

As if it was stuck in a wall and she was pulling it out, Brunhild ignored the great magnetic power and used her tremendous arm strength to forcibly swing the giant sword horizontally.

But…

"One second…is enough!!"

She had taken aim.

Bluish-white sparks flew from Mikoto's bangs.

With the roar of the air bursting, the lightning spear directly struck the steel claymore. Not even Brunhild was able to ignore that. The high voltage

current passed from the blade to her wrists and then rushed throughout her entire body.

Meanwhile, Mikoto swung her left hand. It was the same motion as that used in a sidearm throw in baseball.

Something large moved as if following her palm.

It was a giant mass of reinforced concrete. It flew straight for Brunhild to perform a deadly body blow.

Brunhild forcibly recovered from the electric damage in an instant and used her claymore and her physical strength to stop that mass that could likely destroy a building wall.

A struggle began like two opponents with their swords locked together.

“From the looks of you, you have little to do with magic,” said Brunhild finally. It may have been that she had only now recognized her opponent as being worth speaking to. “Then why are you participating in this conflict over Fräulein Kreutune? I am not trying to start an argument over which side she belongs to, but approaching her increases the risk of getting wrapped up in the core of Gremlin.”

“I don’t want to hear that from the person who suddenly rushed in trying to kill me. …At any rate, I don’t know or care about any of those big picture issues. To be honest, I have no good reason to be fighting here.”

While using her left hand to control the concrete hammer, Mikoto used her right hand to create a sword of iron sand.

And then…

“But I do know one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“You don’t need a good reason to save a friend. If you want to save them, then save them. …I know someone who kept saying those stupid things even when he was driven to the brink of death, and he really did save over 10,000 people in the end. And that idiot that saved so many people is trying to save someone today like always. I know I can’t stop him. No matter how much I don’t want him to do anything dangerous, seeing him off with a push to the back is the sign of a good woman!!”

A loud snapping sound came from the thick concrete.

Something other than simple sharpness of the blade forcibly hacked through the obstacle and secured the claymore’s path.

At the same time, Mikoto swung the iron sand sword with all her might before the claymore could pick up speed.

But when it came to a competition of physical strength, she would lose.

In the very first strike, Mikoto saw the vibrating iron sand could not slice through the steel sheet making up the claymore. She immediately released the iron sand sword.

Instead, she took a coin she had taken out at some point and placed it on top of her thumb. She held her hand out towards Brunhild Eiktobel.

This was the technique she was named after.

She was about to fire the Railgun.

“I have my own reason. I want to save that idiot, so I will!!”

A great flash of light exploded out.

On top of the same overpass road, the Lightning God Thor watched the phenomenon behind him that resembled an explosion and felt the stinging vibration on his skin. A smile formed on the corner of his mouth. This was a wild and belligerent smile unlike his previous one.

“Ohh, ohh. Now, they’re having some fun. I don’t know whether I should praise Academy City for their creations or praise that Valkyrie for keeping up her supersonic speeds even after all that.”

“Cut the crap, boy.”

Silvia the Saint looked at Thor’s right hand with a surprised expression. Arc fusion blades stretched over 20 meters from his five fingers. Even at that level, it was unclear just how powerful an Electromaster of the science side would be needed to duplicate it.

Yet a clear look of astonishment could be seen on Silvia’s face.

Of all of Gremlin and all the Saints, she was the woman who was always standing closest to Ollerus. And yet this level of power was enough to make her look astonished.

She had that much power herself.

In fact, if they were not that powerful, neither Thor nor Silvia would have been able to stand where they were standing.

“With your level of power, you should be able to produce 10 times that length. No…It goes beyond that. If you are really named after *Thor*, then

your true nature lies elsewhere. You don't fit in the category of a lightning god."

"Even so, I still feel ashamed." Thor seemed to completely switch over his focus. He switched from watching a distant battle to facing the enemy before him. "I wanted to avoid this. This isn't the worst possible turn of events, but it's only two or three from the bottom. …This is no fun. My killing will involve many others and could even reach the level of a war. I didn't start this fight for that to happen."

"So you want to keep the extent of the sacrifices to a bare minimum?"

"If possible, I wanted to avoid having this clash in the first place," replied Thor honestly. "If I and someone with power rivaling mine have a true battle, that alone could blow away half the city. So don't worry, young lady. I will hold back as much of my power as I can. *I won't go beyond the lightning god level of Thor.* If you die from just that, it's really your own fault."

"Hah hah. You don't need to worry about that."

Silvia laughed at that arrogant announcement.

It was a much too forceful laugh for a maid.

"I am probably the top ranked magician when it comes to that."

The sound of something slicing through the air could be heard. It was coming from the bundle of rope Silvia held. She swung her arm around, swung her upper body around, and then spun around on the spot. By the time she did that, the rope had drawn out a complex shape in the air.

It was a complex collection of loops.

Just as Thor thought it looked like the string used to spin Japanese tops, a very bad feeling rushed through him.

Silvia moved.

She moved faster and faster and entered the supersonic realm of the Saint as she continued her ballroom dance that seemed meant to strangle one's partner. As she did, complex power entered the rope.

The rope was forcefully pulled back and the many loops constricted and provided vectors as if to spin the object held within.

But there appeared to be nothing inside the loops.

Except there was.

There was air.

"Damn you!!" immediately shouted Thor.

There was an explosion.

She had grabbed the air. From the perspective of physics formulas, it was not impossible. After all, even the air had some resistance. It could create friction. And so it should have been possible to grab the air and spin it like a Japanese top.

But could it be done with the physical body of a human?

One needed to grab hold of a mass of air, spin it with tremendous power to turn it into a swirl of shockwaves, and send it after the target from multiple directions. Who could pull off such a wild technique?

Each one was larger than a crane's wrecking ball that could destroy a building and was likely enough to bury even an underground shelter.

The phenomenon was created by overwhelming physical strength.

The tiny resistance of the air that people normally did not even notice was being used to produce such great power.

(*But that isn't enough to explain it!!*)

Thor immediately swung the arc fusion blades on his right hand.

The air was nothing more than air. He was trying to blow away the swirls of shockwaves by heating up the air to a massive temperature so it expanded explosively.

But it did not work.

After two or three smashing blows, the arc fusion blades suddenly stopped moving. They stopped when their 20 meter length was just about to reach the rope that was still dancing through the air and Silvia who was spinning at high speed.

"My specialty is barriers," said Silvia as she slowed down her spinning and planted her feet firmly on the ground. Even so, the several dozen meters of rope were still swimming through the air like the ribbon in rhythmic gymnastics. "People were always getting mad at me at Buckingham Palace for destroying the palace's equipment too much for a bodyguard. And so I thought long and hard about a way to intercept the assassin without destroying everything around me too. What I came up with was a barrier to suppress my own power."

"A pattern made from a single continuous line with a Christian angel base… So it's a modern Western magic sigil."

"That's right."

That was a method of drawing out Telesma from a different phase that existed on top of this world and sealing it inside an object. The charm was completed by referencing a rose pattern with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet arranged in a set pattern to trace out the name of the angel one wished to call.

In all likelihood, Silvia was not trying to access Telesma. She likely wanted something that functioned as a temple pillar that appropriately guided her great power into itself.

In other words, it was a barrier for a summoning ceremony.

It acted more like the semiconductors in delicate equipment than it did a simple wall. It would complexly switch back and forth between allowing power to pass through and sealing off that power depending on the time and situation in order to provide greater ability and delicacy to what would otherwise be a simple torrent of power. This type of technique was used to give form to "something that (looked like it) could answer any question" using the power flowing into this world from the other phase. It was the same as how sending an even electric current into an integrated circuit allowed complex calculations to be performed.

"I create a wall of Telesma along the rope which makes up a 'hand' that grabs the air."

Silvia once more began spinning around at high speed.

The rope writhed through the air like it was trying to lure something.

That great serpent that swam through the sky then distinctly bared its fangs.

"So…well…don't worry. I am probably one of the most skilled in the world when it comes to not getting others wrapped up in my fights. Just entrust your worries to this maid and go nuts!!"

(Not good. She isn't just using one angel's name. It changes from Gabriel to Raphael, then from Raphael to Michael, then from Michael to Uriel. She's trying to build the power of each consecutive sigil off the power of the previous one!!)

Tarot could be used in many different ways, but in modern Western magic, a reversed card could be used to take advantage of the affinities between the four elements. What card was placed next to the current card could strengthen the useful symbols of the card or the troublesome symbols of the card.

This method was different from those of God's Right Seat who had specialized in a single form of Telesma.

Even if this magic could never compare to them in any one of the four elements, it attempted to outdo them overall with its superior balance.

"Honestly, there really isn't anyone normal around that monster!!"

"Can I take that as a compliment?"

Not even Thor could keep up with the movements of the rope anymore.

But he could see the effects.

The actual movements of the rope did nothing more than create symbols that activated magic. He could see something like a gray dust heading towards the overpass as if it was being guided by the rope.

In the very next instant, one entire block of the overpass road was forcefully spun like a top.

Those gray claws were much too primeval to be referred to as fingers. They had taken that single segment of the road that was several dozen meters long and flipped it over like it was a tea table. But the speed had been so incredible that the road did not simply flip upside down; it continued to spin in place like an electric fan.

It had been ripped off of the support that had held its huge weight.

And both Thor and Silvia herself were still on it.

(You've gotta be kidding me!!)

Thor had been suddenly thrown up into the air with nothing beneath his feet. Those feet swam through the air seeking something to land on. The soles of his shoes finally contacted the side of the road that had already made several full rotations. But it was difficult to call it a "landing". For one thing, if he did manage to stand there, he would have rotated 180 degrees and fallen off after a single second.

But there were some people who could manage it.

Saints.

They could move at supersonic speeds with no assistance.

There was a great difference between the breadth of options available to a normal person in a second and that available to Silvia in a second. Even if the side of the road was only pointing up for 0.1 seconds, it was simple enough for her to run across that edge like a sprinter and charge at Thor.

While licking her lips and continuing to control the rope that danced through the air drawing out complicated sigils, Silvia headed straight for him. The intense sense of danger Thor felt slowed the speed at which time seemed to pass for him, but that maid's speed still overshadowed his.

"Mjöoooooooooooolniiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiir!!!!!" he shouted.

Thanks to his new supply of power, light explosively surged from Thor's limbs. He did not use those arc fusion blades to slice through anything. He used them as electric boosters by explosively expanding the air to forcibly accelerate the movements of his own body.

Thor's body was forced into a spin.

He managed to actually contact the side of the road.

At the same time Silvia reached him.

Instead of using her rope, she attacked directly with her fists two or three times.

If he tried to block those blows with his arm, the arm would explode. Thor forcibly twisted his body around to avoid the blows. Every one of his actions just about tore the joints of his arms and legs to pieces. He was keeping his movements to the bare minimum, but the human body was not made to function at those speeds.

"Ghhh…!!"

Thor pushed forward his arc fusion blades as if trying to strike Silvia and used the fact that she repelled it with the barrier created by the rope's pattern to send himself flying backwards.

He thought he had escaped.

But it may have been a mistake for him to think that.

With no footing once more, Thor began to fall as he was pulled down by gravity. Thor somehow managed to land on the support that was sitting along on the lower level now that it had lost the road that had sat on top of it like an umbrella.

And then he felt a chill run down his spine.

Silvia was clinging to the road block that was still rotating in midair. She was skillfully running along to match the movements of the road as it continually changed which face pointed up like a rolling die. It was similar to an acrobat balancing on a ball. As she did so, a new movement began in the rope. New sigil after new sigil was created and each angel name was

overwritten by a different angel name. As this progressed, a tremendous power gathered around her.

And then Silvia jumped from the midair piece of road.

The rotating block of road made an odd movement that seemed to follow the way Silvia had twisted her body. It was as if she was controlling it via magnetism. As if it was connected to her right foot by something invisible, the giant mass of concrete and asphalt began rotating both horizontally and vertically…and then it suddenly dropped down like a morning star.

Thor's eyes opened wide in shock and he shouted out, "Y-you idiot!!"

"I was called that a lot at Buckingham Palace too."

A tremendous vibration shook the entire area.

It was like some horrid cup-and-ball game. As if she was returning the road she had destroyed, it slammed back down on top of the support that had been left behind. She even made sure the road surface was facing up.

Of course, she slammed it down so that it would catch Thor between the giant weight of the road and the support below.

"Well, that should do it," muttered Silvia in disinterest as she landed on top of the road she had slammed down and retrieved the rope from the air with nothing but movements of her wrist. "If you want to fight a Saint seriously, you need to start by altering some of your basic assumptions. I can extend an instant so much with my speed that my movement options are orders of magnitude greater than normal."

Silvia then turned around in order to deal with the remaining opponent.

In that direction, Brunhild Eiktobel and the Academy City girl's battle was still ongoing. But a two-sided attack from two Saints would finish that quickly enough.

But then…

The ground wobbled. Silvia initially assumed just placing the road back on its support after ripping them apart must not have been enough to keep its balance, but that was not it.

It was not simply wobbling.

She could feel clear intent in the motion.

"Did you forget, you piece of shit…?"

She heard something from below.

That was when Silvia finally realized what was happening.

“Don’t tell me…*you’re forcibly lifting up the road!?*”

“The Lightning God Thor was a god of superhuman strength. Throughout all of Norse mythology only two could use the lightning hammer Mjölnir because of how damn heavy it was. My spiritual items include his belt. I hold the name of the god of war said to be even more powerful than the god that ripped apart Fenrir’s jaws. Do you really think a mere bridge is going to be enough to crush me!?”

Silvia’s vision rose by about 15 meters in an instant.

No…

Thor had taken the block of road trying to crush him and thrown it straight up into the air.

(So he’s the type with strength that he cannot convert into speed.)

Silvia calmly thought while flying through the air.

She was a Saint. Given her athletic ability, she need not fear falling. After all, she could jump over to a nearby building rooftop with such ease she might as well hum as she did so.

But…

(Wait…15 meters?)

Her eyebrows moved slightly.

She sensed danger.

Fifteen meters in the air was well outside the reach of a normal human. But how long had the arc fusion blades stretching from Thor’s right hand been?

“20 meters…shit! He can reach me!!”

Silvia frantically swung her rope to draw out the barrier sigil. The attack came in the next instant.

It was like a terrible cook battling a giant radish with a kitchen knife in hand.

Those five scorching claws moved mercilessly for Silvia and roasted unevenly through the road that was flying through the air.

Part 8

The roar caused by that great mass striking the ground acted as a sign.

Leivinia Birdway was the first to move.

The symbolic weapon in her hand took various forms to match its use and element.

Right now, it was a cup.

That corner of the four directions represented water, the back, the moon, women, and blue. It also controlled one of the suits in the minor arcana of tarot.

The wall of water swirling around her stretched upwards all at once. Once it reached a set height, it stretched out in an even disk. That transparent piece of art that could be mistaken for a giant umbrella or tree grew hundreds and thousands of cold, sharp fruits.

Harvest time was represented by a torrential rain.

A shower of water daggers fell in every direction around Birdway. The umbrella-like silhouette was eaten away from the inside as its entire area was transformed into deadly weapons.

She knew.

She knew that Imagine Breaker could negate any supernatural power but that it was limited to his right wrist and down. And so the optimal answer was not a single absolute attack but a huge mass of normal attacks that overwhelmed him.

He could likely negate one or two of them.

He might be able to evade a third and fourth.

But that would be the end of it.

The thousands, tens of thousands, and hundreds of thousands of daggers were packed in so tightly that they did not leave enough space for a human to hide. Everywhere but the location where that boy held his right hand would be skewered again and again.

Or so it should have been.

However…

"…!!"

A high-pitched noise rang out.

Kamijou Touma had raised his right hand above his head and negated one of the many approaching daggers with his fingertips.

But it did not end there.

As the water dagger shattered like glass, its fragments scattered in every direction and struck the other surrounding daggers. This slightly altered

their trajectory. This caused a chain reaction that created a blank spot that should not have been there.

It was a phenomenon that could only occur when the daggers were packed in so tightly that no space for a human was left.

All of the water daggers struck the asphalt and sent orange sparks flying throughout the entire area. Only the area one meter around Kamijou had avoided damage.

Precognition.

After so many battles with both scientific espers and occult magicians that they were commonplace for him, Kamijou had obtained that sense that resembled the instinct of an artisan. When he tried to understand it himself, it only threw off its accuracy.

But Birdway's expression did not change.

"I already worked that into my plan, you idiot," she quietly spat out.

She had aimed for that moment after Kamijou broke through the shower of water daggers with just his right hand and had switched his thoughts over from defense to offense.

At a point near Kamijou's left side, a small flicker of white light appeared in what should have been empty air.

In the very next moment, a pure white flash of light exploded out. It was a spherical explosion with a diameter of about 10 meters. It tore straight through the road signs and asphalt. She unhesitatingly bared her fangs during that moment when Kamijou was switching gears in his mind.

She called it a summoned explosion.

This supernatural phenomenon was not caused by preparing temples, symbolic weapons, chants, or ceremonies to complexly draw out and use Telesma. She simply called forth the power and let it loose without giving it form. Saying she simplified and sped up the process made it sound nice, but it was the same as firing a rocket without going through any kind of a safety check. If a magician without the proper knowledge tried to use it, they would simply become the stereotypical horror victim as they were swallowed up by the power they themselves had called forth.

"Ghh…!!"

Kamijou forcibly twisted his body and tried to suppress the explosion with his right hand.

This created an even larger opening.

Leivinia Birdway had already transformed her symbolic weapon into the sword that represented wind.

She casually held it up and swung it down.

Her attack would cut straight through one edge of the battlefield.

And through the joint of Kamijou Touma's right shoulder.

The boy was still in the middle of holding out his right hand to deal with the summoned explosion that had appeared near his left side. He did not have time to swing his arm back around and block the wind sword. And because he had forcibly twisted his body around, he was very nearly off balance and therefore could not jump back either.

In other words, this was checkmate.

Birdway was worried about the unknown phenomenon that occurred when his arm was severed, but Kamijou himself could not freely control it either. If that was the end of it, that was fine. If he started going on a rampage, that would simply create many, many more openings for her to attack. Just two or three more swings of her arm would end it even if that happened. There was no way he could turn the situation around. It was that kind of decisive checkmate.

But…

However…

The wind sword Birdway fired was knocked away by something.

That something was a pure white light.

It was the light of the summoned explosion that should have been attacking Kamijou Touma.

"What…!?"

This time, Kamijou's actions had left Birdway's expectations. She immediately transformed her symbolic weapon into a wand and held it out horizontally.

It had been his right hand that had caused it.

Imagine Breaker was nothing more than the power to negate supernatural powers. It could not be used for anything other than that. But he could freely move those five fingers and make various different forms out of his hand. And whether it was fire or water, *power would naturally flow in the path of least resistance.*

Fire would spread in the direction with more oxygen.

Water would flow down a hill.

And…

There were tons of technologies that took advantage of those properties.

For example, guns used a tube made of a strong material to send the explosive power of gunpowder in a single direction to fire a bullet.

For example, directional landmines attached the explosive on the inside of a bowl-shaped panel to use more of its force to pierce through a tank's armor.

Air ducts, electric cables, gas turbines, a crane's wrecking ball, steam locomotives, skis, smokestacks, pasta makers, fuel pumps…and in a broader sense, even the roads that controlled the flows of people.

It was no different from that.

He had not used Imagine Breaker to negate the supernatural power.

He had brought his five fingers right up to its border to create the ultimate "wall" with his right hand. That had created a sort of guide rail that made the direction he wanted into the "path of least resistance" for the explosive power. He had used that to send the summoned explosion in the direction of the wind sword.

"Did you forget? I directly fought Fiamma of the Right."

The unexpected event created an opening in Birdway.

Kamijou kicked off the asphalt in order to make the most use of it. He ran.

"And so I know *there are powers with a pressure great enough that I can't completely negate them with my right hand.* You just have too much power, Birdway!!"

For the first time, Birdway clenched her back teeth slightly.

And she spat out, "*Is your hand the symbol of petty tricks?* You may have gotten one strike in, but you're still out of your league!!"

While still holding her wand out horizontally, Birdway spun it around once like a baton.

Orange flames shot out along its path. The flames grew into a giant wall which pressed towards Kamijou.

"That's just a distraction!!"

Kamijou penetrated the wall without negating it with his right hand.

Instead of trying to destroy it head on, he swung his arm to the side in a pushing motion to divert the scorching wall in a different direction where it simply burned through the scenery.

Immediately after he got rid of that orange curtain, a group of gray daggers that appeared to be made of stone flew towards him like a storm.

Kamijou twisted his body with all his strength to avoid a single blade mixed in with the rest. A trail of red blood ran down from where his cheek was lightly scratched.

But Kamijou smiled.

"*That knife alone was real.* Isn't that right, Birdway!?"

"Hah. Such interesting behavior!"

If he had simply tried to break through it all with his right hand, that blade would have pierced right through his palm.

While in an awkward position after swinging his upper body around, he forcibly swung his fist and destroyed one of the many remaining blades. The chain reaction of destruction and impacts with fragments opened up a slight safe area just like with the downpour of water blades.

There was now only a few meters between the two of them.

He would reach her with just a bit more effort.

"Well, I suppose there would have been no reason to give you so much focus if you were just a kid who swung his right hand around."

As Kamijou stepped further forward, Birdway reached behind to her back. It was an action similar to pulling a sword from a scabbard on her back, but it was more likely she had something hidden in the back of her blouse.

Kamijou thought she was going to pull out some kind of suspicious card or crystal ball.

But she did not.

"I do not much like modern weapons like missiles and machine guns."

She pulled it out.

She held it out.

"But these flintlock guns are a different matter. I told you that once before, didn't I?"

It was an old-fashioned handgun that could only hold a single bullet. It was colored with black oak and gold, so it looked like something a pirate would have used long, long ago.

All the muscles of Kamijou's body stiffened.

He had a single piece of proof.

That was the hole in his right side. The wound from being shot by Anti-Skill.

In other words…

Kamijou Touma did not have the physical ability needed to evade a bullet that had nothing to do with supernatural powers.

"Birdway…!!"

"I cast aside my pride."

They were just a few meters apart.

He only had to take one more step. Then his fist could reach her. But Birdway's slender finger touched the trigger to make the best use of that definite distance.

She was not aiming at his head. Even at that close range, she was aiming exactly at his lower abdomen that was his center of gravity. That made it near impossible for him to evade. Even if he frantically swung his body out of the way, she could still hit him somewhere on his torso.

With her voice almost in a whisper, she added, "So that I could be certain of victory."

Part 9

The limited space of the underground passageway may not have been spacious or sturdy enough for those three monsters created by Academy City.

The first attack came head on.

The white dolls created based on the residual thoughts of the Sisters charged towards Accelerator, and the hundreds of feathers of the wing that had been Kakine Teitoku's right arm turned into a storm of spears that filled the entire area as they violently attacked without bothering to avoid the girls.

But…

This time, Accelerator's heart and mind did not disturb the equations that controlled his powers.

If he resolved himself and looked straight ahead, he only needed to see them off.

He would see them off to a place where no one could reach them from that shitty city that was forcibly holding them here.

“Use this,” said Mugino from next to him. “This is your job.”

In the next instant, a beam of light shot from Mugino Shizuri’s palm and headed straight for Accelerator. That Particle-Function Waveform High Speed Cannon was powerful enough to slice an Aegis ship in half. If any disturbance had existed in the #1’s reflection equations, he might have been turned to ash without even having time to feel pain.

But that did not happen.

He made sure of it.

“…”

Accelerator accurately grasped the vectors of that attack. He adjusted and focused the vectors to give them new form and properties. And then he used it to attack all three of the attacking girls at once.

Sound disappeared.

There was only light.

This went beyond simply piercing through them or roasting them. They disappeared. Not even a single piece or 1 mm fragment remained. They were truly annihilated. He made sure they would never be controlled so unreasonably again. Those girls should not have been there, so he returned them to where they belonged.

The girls’ expressions had not changed even up to the very last moment.

He had no idea what they might have been thinking when that moment came.

But that was fine.

It was possible there really was someone in the world who could understand or determine the feelings of the dead and use that to save their hearts. There may have been someone who could honor the dead by helping resolve the things they regretted or had left behind. But that was not a job for Accelerator who had given himself into the darkness and killed too many people. However, before he went to hell, there were things he could do even with his power that was a like an incarnation of violence and destruction.

The feelings of the dead belonged to the dead.

They must not be used for the benefit of others.

To ensure that those feelings were not destroyed, Academy City's #1 would gently seal them away and definitively see them off. And he would stand in the way of anyone trying to disturb them like a grave keeper before grave robbers. Because he reeked too greatly of death, he could not claim that humans were fundamentally good, but he would still work to protect the things he wished to protect.

He was finished chasing after a certain someone and focusing too much on that someone.

He would take a different path.

Even if he could not do what that someone did, he could do things that someone could not.

He would become what only he could be.

"Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He grabbed at the large number of approaching spears, grabbed ahold of the vectors of something flowing through them, and forcibly reversed that flow. Dark Matter contained no blood, but Accelerator could feel a pulse signal similar to bioelectricity. Just like destroying the center by applying pressure to an extremity, he broke through all the countless spears at once. Kakine Teitoku's body at the center twitched a bit.

"See?"

Mugino fired a Meltdowner beam while Kakine Teitoku's movement was briefly stopped.

The majority of his upper body was blown away.

But…

"In the end…"

Some white substance had spread out around Kakine's remaining legs.

It was on the floor, the wall, and even the ceiling.

"I can create almost anything, but it seems I'm the best at creating myself. The specs are highest with that. The single original is better than 10,000 clones. It's a miniaturized version of one of Academy City's set rules."

Something stood "up" perpendicularly from the wall.

It was a pale white Kakine Teitoku.

Mugino stared at it like it was some gruesome piece of art.

“Your main body supposedly has a few flesh-and-blood organs left in it. Did you move them away into the floor just before I attacked?”

“Well, what do you think? Did I move my organs out of the way at the last second or did I just remake all of them? Were the organs ever in that body to begin with? Are they in this one now? Maybe they’re scattered throughout the city and connected by thin strands of Dark Matter. And of course, *would it even do any good to destroy my flesh-and-blood organs now?*”

Academy City had espers who could transform their appearance, but this went well beyond that. Was his brain creating his powers or were his powers preserving their existence by creating his brain? Was he alive or dead? Was this a dream or reality? He was a Moebius strip that jumbled all of that together. All they knew was that the existence known as Kakine Teitoku was standing before them in some way.

They could destroy him, but it would be exceedingly difficult to be sure they had killed him.

And if they did not kill him, they could not stop him even if they blew off his arms and legs or crushed his organs.

But…

“Who gives a shit!?”

Accelerator charged directly forward. He stepped into the center of the pure white puddle spreading out over 10 meters, ripped apart the countless spears that shot out, and slammed his palm against the center point.

He grabbed at the electrical signals running through the Dark Matter and reversed them.

A loud snapping sound rang out.

A large hole in the unnaturally perfect shape of a hexagon appeared in the puddle. The damage had been intentionally cut off before it reached the entire system of Kakine Teitoku.

“It’s no use. Information is exchanged between the different blocks, but there is no direct connection. The blocks can freely communicate without any direct wiring, so your attacks cannot reach me. I suppose it is similar to an electronic wiretapping system that intentionally crosses the wires via alien crosstalk. An attack across those lines cannot reach me because the lines are not actually connected.”

“Then I will destroy it all.”

“As you do, I will be expanding the network. With every piece expanding at the same time, it will expand exponentially.”

“Then I just have to destroy it faster than that!!”

If Academy City was viewed as a single body, this was similar to a battle between cancer cells attempting to bring down the functioning of the entire body by infinitely multiplying and elements preserving the health of the body by urging old cells to commit suicide to prevent growing cancerous.

It was a battle between the #2 who could make someone suffer by creating something and the #1 who could protect someone by destroying something.

They wielded their massive powers in the opposite direction of that power’s initial image.

However…

“How much time do you have left?” asked Kakine Teitoku mockingly.

Accelerator’s vector reflection and Mugino Shizuri’s massive beams of light were both tearing away at his body. But something pure white was continually spreading across the walls and ceiling. Kakine felt no fear over being destroyed. He was definitively missing that instinct that any life form should have.

“Once that limit comes, you are done for. That may be the cue for the appearance of those wings that no theory can explain, but you can’t use those for long periods of time or have complete control of them, can you? In fact, that unexplainable phenomenon must cause a huge amount of unexplainable consumption. Either way, you have no time left.”

And…

“And I have nothing to worry about once it is just the #4 left. I don’t know how much she has grown, but the basic difference in power is just too great. No matter what she has overcome, she cannot defeat me.”

That comment led to Kakine’s head being annihilated, but the rest of the figure simply ignored gravity and “fell” into the puddle on the wall. A new Kakine Teitoku floated up in a different spot.

“This is a difference in the freedom our powers give us. And that difference is insurmountable for you. I need not even do anything. I do not simply have an infinite supply of Dark Matter. My inspiration also knows no bounds. No matter how many cards you gather in your hand, I can push it back with brute force as numbers means nothing to me. …Nothing you do will ever even reach me. To reach me, you first need to climb over the wall of infinity that continues on eternally.”

It was like continuing to do something that did not add up.

It was like being ordered to empty a swimming pool using a bucket while the water was constantly being filled by a waterfall.

“Choose.” Academy City’s #2’s lips moved. “Will you slowly dry up over a long period of time or will you die in a single painless instant?”

Countless spears burst out and rushed toward Accelerator and Mugino Shizuri.

Part 10

The final weapon she held out at Kamijou Touma was a flintlock pistol that had nothing to do with magic.

It was not even worth wondering whether he should evade to the left or to the right.

The old-fashioned pistol was relatively low power, but he had no guarantee he could block it with just the bones of his arm.

He was not a tights-wearing hero from American comics. He could not dodge a bullet flying straight at him, and repelling it with a body of steel was out of the question.

As such, he had only one option.

He forced down his passive instincts and charged straight forward. He was only a few meters away from Birdway. Just one more step and he would be in punching range. His only option was to knock the hand holding the gun out of the way before she could fire. If he managed to divert the barrel just a bit to the side, the fired bullet would fly off in a harmless direction.

(Make it…)

The extreme tension threw off his sense of time.

The movements of his arm as he desperately stretched it out felt horribly sluggish and slow.

(Make it!!)

Birdway continued to aim the flintlock pistol at him with no change of expression.

The finger on the trigger moved.

The small piece of metal that determined people’s deaths activated.

“Ooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

But first, Kamijou’s right hand…or rather, the very tip of the middle finger just barely touched the elegantly decorated barrel. The bottom of his finger gained a very slight sense of making solid contact. It was similar to raising a fishing pole when the hook was positioned so it might or might not catch in the mouth of a large fish. If the fish coincidentally happened to move just slightly, the hook would miss and the fish would escape into the water. The fisher would lose everything.

He forcibly swung his right hand to the side.

He attempted to dig the hook deeply into the fish’s mouth it had shallowly entered.

At the same moment, Leivinia Birdway’s index finger finished its movement.

She pulled the trigger.

The flintlock gun barrel was knocked away from Kamijou.

(…What?)

Kamijou had evaded near death, yet an intensely bad feeling spread from his gut.

Yes…

(She pulled the trigger, *but I didn’t hear a gunshot!?*)

“Wrong move, idiot.”

He did not even have time for that girl’s voice to send a chill running down his spine.

With a dull roar, a stone pillar extended up from the ground and accurately slammed straight into the center of Kamijou’s chest. Not only did it knock the breath out of him, but it seemed to destroy his heart’s rhythm of expansion and contraction.

“Gh…bh…!?”

He frantically tried to recover his posture, but then all strength suddenly left his right knee. The disturbance in the flow of his blood that started with his heart in the center was belatedly spreading like a wave to each part of his body.

He just barely managed to keep one leg underneath him to avoid completely collapsing.

A dull shock struck his cheek.

Calling it a slap made it sound nice, but he had more or less been hit with the grip of the flintlock pistol. It felt similar to being hit by the end of a hammer's handle.

The blow shook Kamijou's brain and he finally fell to the side onto the asphalt road surface.

His movements looked as frail as a marionette that's strings had been cut.

"At least do some research into how guns work... But I guess that might be too much to ask of someone from Japan. But you at least fought in the center of World War III." Birdway spun the pistol around in front of herself while she watched Kamijou struggle on the road surface due to temporarily losing his sense of up and down. "With a flintlock gun, the gunpowder and bullet have to be inserted through the barrel before firing. The work can be shortened by switching out the fuse for a percussion cap, but you can't avoid having to load the bullet. …Do you understand now, boy? *This gun cannot be fired just by pulling it out.*"

"Gh…gh…!!"

"All I wanted from you was an opening to get in a decisive blow. And I don't blame you for faltering at the sight of one of these aimed at you. After all, *the pain and fear of guns is still etched into your body.*"

If Kamijou had calmly thought about the deficiencies of the flintlock design, he might have realized that. But he had not had time to think calmly. When that thing was suddenly pointed at him in the middle of a supernatural battle, he needed time to switch over the gears of his mind.

His options had been to freeze up in fear or aim for a miraculous recovery and steal the gun, but the result would have been the same either way.

Once his focus had been pointed solely at that elegant pistol, she had used magic to attack him head on.

"Now then."

At some point, a small bottle, a metal ball about the size of a pachinko ball, and a thin rod about the size of a chopstick had appeared in Birdway's fingers. The bottle was filled with a black powder.

"I'll teach you the proper way of doing it."

Birdway pointed the elegant pistol's barrel upwards, poured the powder in, and then dropped the metal ball in as if using it as a cover. Lastly, she stuck the thin rod down the barrel and used a bit of strength to force the ball and powder down.

“You really are not supposed to point this type of gun’s barrel downwards. But this one isn’t cheap. The bullet isn’t going to fall out.” Birdway tossed the rod and bottle away and aimed the gun at Kamijou where he lay collapsed on the ground. “Give up on Fräulein Kreutune. *I will give you a reason to give up.* You have shown that you are not the type to give up even after being shot in the stomach. Then what about the leg? Once you lose your ability to move around and your ability to support the weight behind your fist, you should have enough of an excuse to just lie in a hospital bed.”

“Heh…”

The symptoms of his light concussion must have been gradually softening because Kamijou was now able to look up at Birdway with hazy eyes. A slight smile was on his lips.

“Do you feel the need to go this far because you feel anything less will not make up for the damage at Hawaii and Baggage City?”

“So what if I do?”

“Then you’ve already admitted *that you’ve done something horrible.* In that case, don’t head off in the wrong direction. Even if you capture Fräulein Kreutune, lure out the Magic God Othinus, defeat her, and bring about something like world peace…hell, even if billions of people thank you, there is no way you will feel satisfied.”

“I’m sick of hearing your appeals to emotion.”

“Is that so?” forced out Kamijou as he was breathing erratically. “I just don’t understand how anyone could try to save people purely based off of logic and efficiency. Because from that perspective *it doesn’t matter, does it?* If you pull out that easiest of arguments,*you lose all reason to save them in the first place.* There is a necessary level of evil to keep money circulating enough to support a society. It’s just a trivial fraction of the whole. Even if humanity goes extinct, life forms with a different type of thought process will eventually fill the earth. …Just from a logical standpoint, those arguments are good enough. *If you only care about logic, you don’t need to save anyone.*”

For Kamijou who lay collapsed on the road, Birdway’s gun barrel was an absolute threat.

He would not receive another chance to leap forward and take away that elegant pistol.

“It’s the same. We’re the same. We want to save them, so we do. You searched out all the best logical reasons for that. But you’re going about it

the wrong way. What you're doing is like saving starving people by chopping off pieces of human flesh to feed them."

"But what have you managed to do?" readily replied Birdway. Her words stabbed into the core of that boy. "You know nothing of the makeup of the organization known as Gremlin. You don't know where their headquarters are. You don't know who their leader is. You have only been able to chase after the members causing sporadic problems across the world. And all you've achieved doing that is getting yourself thrown about and increasing the number of victims. That is all you can do. To use your example, what you are doing is leaving the starving people to starve and simply watching as they collapse."

"Perhaps. No…You're probably right," admitted Kamijou.

He admitted his own powerlessness.

"It's said I stopped World War III with a one-on-one fight against Fiamma of the Right, but that wasn't just my power. I only managed it because the people fighting all over the world wore down the source of Fiamma's power. What I can do alone truly is limited, and the kinds of things I can think up alone rarely work in this wide world."

But even so…

"But, Birdway. Just because my reasoning is childish and wrong and just because my argument can be easily defeated with a bit of cleverness does not mean your reasoning is completely correct."

"What?"

"If the only way to feed those starving people is to chop up human flesh, why is it that you are completely unscathed?"

He stared at her.

Kamijou Touma stared directly at Leivinia Birdway.

He stared at something deep within her.

"I have fought many different people in the past. There were very few that I was truly able to do anything about on my own. I have exposed a lot of people to danger. …But the reason they all lent me their power and the reason I am still alive today has to be because I cut my own flesh first because I was the one to make the suggestion. You have not done that."

"Are you saying I have no right to get others involved because I make the decision while looking down from above? Are you saying I can influence people's lives so long as they accept it?"

"*In a way.*"

Birdway was a bit surprised how quickly he replied.

She had thought he would reply with some cheap argument about the basic goodness of people.

But…

"And the way to get me to accept it would probably have been much simpler than what you went through," muttered Kamijou while lying on the ground. "It didn't have to be Hawaii and Baggage City. It didn't have to be Fräulein Kreutune, the final piece needed for Gungnir."

His voice was frail.

"If you truly needed a sacrifice…"

But there was a strong core hidden beneath.

"If you needed to be able to take action up until the moment the issue was resolved and therefore could not cut off pieces of your own flesh…"

It was as if he was explaining the very, very basics to a small child who did not understand some simple matter.

"*You just had to choose me. That would have been enough for me to accept it.*"

This time, Leivinia Birdway truly felt like time had stopped even if just for a moment.

He was not simply throwing a tantrum and saying she had to bring an end to all tragedy.

He understood tragedy was inevitable.

The boy was mad because she had moved the target of that tragedy in the wrong direction.

"Surely you could have done something," Kamijou Touma's words continued all the while. "You didn't have to use Fräulein Kreutune. You didn't have to offer up Hawaii and Baggage City as sacrifices. Surely you could have used some other means of luring out the leader of Gremlin or the Magic God Othinus herself."

"Do you understand what you are saying?"

"Even if we don't know the makeup of Gremlin, where their headquarters are, or who their leader is, we still have my right hand! You could have at least leaked false information saying it was a threat to Gremlin as a whole!! With the power of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, you definitely could have done that!!"

“You are not a monster like Fräulein Kreutune. You will die if someone merely blocks up your nose and mouth. Do you have any idea what it means for you to stand in the center of a battle with Gremlin as an enemy of theirs they see no value in keeping around!?”

“Othinus appeared before me in Baggage City. *She wanted to see what the right hand that resolved that incident could do.* I was easily defeated, but she had to have at least viewed it as something she had to try out first. It may have been a thin, thin thread and it may have been nowhere near as sure a thing as Fräulein Kreutune…but why did you make the decision without me when there was another way!? Why did you choose such a fucked up method!? Why did you choose to make all these sacrifices!? Why did you choose the path that robbed everyone of their smiles!? Even if this is just me being selfish and even if it isn’t realistic, *do you really expect me to accept what you did!?*”

“…You’re insane,” muttered Birdway.

She had continually investigated the leaders and charismatic people of many eras and cultures who could have been ostracized had things been even a little different. And yet she could not help but let those words spill out.

“You’re completely insane. I had glimpsed some odd things in you before, but this settles it. …Why do you just assume that you will fight? Why do you see nothing wrong with having things taken from you? You aren’t some war-crazed person who has lost his place in a normal peaceful life. Nor are you some sheltered person who has never seen true battle yet wishes to join the world he sees on TV. I can’t figure out what it is that drives you!”

“You want to know why?”

Kamijou thought for a bit while still in that hopeless situation.

Why had he taken part in all of the previous incidents?

Was it because he was surrounded by misfortune? Was he constantly getting wrapped up in incidents he wanted to avoid and was constantly getting stuck in positions where he would be killed if he did not resolve them?

Had it been Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Stiyl Magnus, the Anglican Church, or Academy City? Had those different people or groups made careful preparations to ensure a situation where he could not run away?

Had it been because he had never once met a simple villain of the sort seen in movies? Had it been because he was terribly reluctant to simply discard any of them?

Many different ideas came to mind. And ultimately…

Kamijou Touma shook all of them out of his head and replied.

“I think it was because I never had a single reason to abandon them.”

“…I’ve heard enough,” spat out Birdway.

She aimed the flintlock pistol at his thigh.

This time, she would actually fire.

Her finger was on the trigger.

“I have always wondered how Academy City is able to control someone like you. The biggest threat you hold is not the power of your right hand or even *that which is hidden within*. Nor is it the precognition you have gained from your past experiences. Even with a right hand that can negate supernatural abilities, a normal person would not be able to accomplish much. The hand itself cannot burn anything or gather any information. And yet you have left accomplishments behind. You did not join in because of that right hand. It was you who made use of the power residing in your right hand.”

“*You’re only figuring that out now?*”

“*In that case…*”

Birdway’s expression suddenly changed around her eyes.

She had the look of someone pitying someone else.

“…You need to be careful from now on. What you hold is not good or evil. You hold the seeds to a great wave that cannot be described in those terms. Perhaps it is the same thing that was once brought to bloom by the man who built up a city of steel and electricity or the woman who smiles thinly in the depths of an old cathedral. Or perhaps it is something that will swallow up even that giant flower. If you can completely grasp it in your hand, it will give you great power, but if you cannot, it will be indescribably disastrous for you.”

“What are you saying?”

“You do not need to understand it right away. I will give you time to think on it. But my method may be a bit painful.”

This time, Birdway truly pulled the trigger. It was less like she was punctuating her sentence and more like she was trying to nip a new threat in the bud.

But just before she did…

Some powerful force pulled on Birdway's right hand. The elegant pistol's barrel was moved well off to the side and the bullet was fired in the completely wrong direction.

"What?"

"Do you remember what I said, Birdway?"

A slight scraping sound was heard.

During the long, long conversation, Kamijou had slowly recovered from his concussion. As he worked to stand back up, he brought a hand to the ground and his fingernails scraped across the asphalt.

"I have fought many different people. But I didn't do it alone. I barely ever truly fought alone. …There have been people willing to accompany me on my reckless challenges. And these people are a hell of a lot more softhearted than me."

Leivinia Birdway looked up and finally realized what had happened.

On the top level of the multilevel overpass, a girl was looking down from the edge.

"Academy City's #3… Did she control my gun with magnetism or something!?" shouted Birdway before taking a large step backwards.

An extremely long arc fusion blade cut directly in between Kamijou and Birdway.

This time it was Thor.

They were fighting on the road at the top level of the multilevel overpass, but Kamijou and Birdway were standing on the wide sports arena-like area one level down. Also, one section of the road above had disappeared.

The two of them were both fighting Saints who had special power even among the magic side. They were in a situation where an instantaneous mistake could result in their bodies being pulverized, bone and all, but those two who used thunder had used what small opening they had to its fullest in order to save Kamijou from his hopeless situation.

"A lot of people have fought today. All sorts of dangerous people are gathered here thanks to Fräulein Kreutune. I probably couldn't stand up to a single one of them."

White smoke continued to rise from the slice left by the arc fusion blade. Birdway could see a figure slowly standing up on the other side of that curtain.

“But in the end, you all can only split the work up between you. …You can only function as individuals.”

He had been shot in the side, he had weakened himself while continuing to act in that state and without getting any sleep at all, and he had even experienced a concussion.

And yet Kamijou Touma stood up.

“*No one truly knows who Fräulein Kreutune is.* And that is why no one feels any kind of attachment for her. She was only freed yesterday from being sealed away for so long, so of course no one does. But even if we do not know who she is, some of us still want to save her. No, there are even people fighting right now who know nothing about Fräulein Kreutune. They are fighting for some reason other than saving her. …But that doesn’t matter. Even if they don’t know the exact situation and even if all of our conditions don’t quite match up, we still managed to bring about this result! A great power has moved in the direction of saving her!!”

There had been no need to hold some great objective from the beginning.

It did not matter if they were fighting for completely different reasons.

Even if they were...

Once it was all over…

If they were told their actions had inadvertently saved a woman, no one would feel bad about that. At the very least, they would feel better than if they were told their actions had inadvertently killed a woman.

And Kamijou felt that was what it meant to be human.

“Birdway, you said I am crazy for doing what I do, but you are absolutely wrong about that. In truth, anyone would want to save someone if they saw or heard that they were suffering for no good reason!!”

“You…”

“*We* won’t lose.” He slowly and distinctly held up his right fist as he stared at and spoke to that powerful magic cabal boss. “There is not a single reason why we would lose to people like you who would never consider something so basic!!”

Part 11

While Rhinoceros Beetle 05 observed the intense battles on the multilevel overpass from a short distance away, it confirmed Fräulein Kreutune's location on the middle level with the naked eye.

Fremea Seivelun banged on its pure white surface from where she stood next to it.

At this point, even that was enough to have a clear effect on the cracks inside Rhinoceros Beetle 05.

"Nyah, nyah! We found her!! We need to hurry up and save her!!"

"That would increase the risk of getting wrapped up in the combat activities currently occurring in the area. Even if the others have no intention of attacking us, we cannot escape the high probability of being struck by a stray attack. In addition, it appears some of those involved wish to prevent anyone from approaching Fräulein Kreutune. There is a danger of those people directly attempting to interfere if we approach her."

And…

Rhinoceros Beetle 05's analysis indicated it no longer had the durability to withstand a battle of that class thanks to the cracks continuing to form within it.

Of course, if it informed the girls of that, there was a danger of the breadth of their actions shrinking even further. With an already risky situation, the beetle wished to avoid lessening their freedom of choice.

"Then what do we do? says Misaka as Misaka asks a question."

"I will analyze their attack patterns and calculate out how wide an opening we have. …Human vision shrinks further than people realize when they are focused on something. At first glance, this multilevel overpass looks like a wide open space, but it is actually like a labyrinth with fluidly changing routes, so if we move based on set rules, we can safely-…"

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 trailed off.

The artificial voice created by its giant thin wings suddenly stopped.

Last Order and Fremea Seivelun had suddenly disappeared.

No, that was not accurate.

Someone had entered "within" Rhinoceros Beetle 05.

In a mysterious space void of color and sound where not a single leaf on the surrounding roadside trees moved, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 focused its attention forwards.

At a spot a mere 5 meters from its cannon barrel stood a boy with brown hair and wearing a high-class jacket.

His eyes contained a dark light that was only found in those who had continuously walked down the hidden back roads of life. The thin smile on his lips seemed to contain all forms of confidence. Despite Rhinoceros Beetle 05's cannon being at such extreme close range, he did not remove his hands from his pants pockets.

In that world where all color had faded to black or white, that boy alone contained color.

It was as if he was illuminated as that world's sole king.

"Kakine…Teitoku."

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was unable to tell whether it was actually using its wings to produce its artificial voice or not, but it muttered that name all the same.

And even as it made that deduction, it denied that possibility.

No.

That could not be true.

The real Kakine Teitoku would not expend any of his power for a mere pawn like Rhinoceros Beetle 05. If he wanted to, he could create hundreds or thousands of powerful pawns in an instant.

And yet…

The colorful monster slowly moved his mouth.

"So am I something like your aspiration?"

"…"

"C'mon, don't just sit there. I'm the aspiration you created for yourself. I'm the wall you automatically set up to define *what you think Kakine Teitoku is.*"

It did indeed seem this was not the real #2.

This was similar to someone having a mental breakdown due to the massive stress of constantly hiding behind cover in fear of a sniper hiding in some unknown location of the darkness.

“You would know best why something like me has appeared. With a set amount of time having passed since you parted ways with Kakine Teitoku, you are turning into something else. But you yourself refuse to admit it. You are afraid of losing your powerful personality as a portion of Kakine Teitoku. You hesitate to lose it and you are frozen up with regrets. …That is why I am here. *I am here to remind you what you are about to lose. I am here to supplement your data image of what your original form was.*”

The cracks were even now continuing to run through Rhinoceros Beetle 05 and it could completely collapse at any moment.

Its actions taken to slow the progress of the damage and to compensate for lost internal data may have been similar to those of a human holding a wound to slow blood loss. It did not matter if those actions would actually save it or not. Whether one had received a fatal wound or one’s entire body had been skewered, one could not help but carry out those actions.

But…

If its wavering essence was compensated for by renewing its data image here…

“It seems you have put off killing some brat with your pathetic misconversions, but that ends here,” spat out that someone.

His tone made the beetle loathe being a part of him, but no tone of voice could have sounded more like Kakine Teitoku.

“Who are you?”

That question reached Rhinoceros Beetle 05.

It reached it.

“What should you do to act like yourself?”

In the end, the real Kakine Teitoku had not seen the need to do a single thing despite the fact that Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had suppressed the clear relationship of master and slave. He had done nothing and left Rhinoceros Beetle 05 unable to explain the logical inconsistency of its own actions. When that happened, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 would need to take a second look at its own essence in the role of slave rather than master. In that process, it would need to rewrite itself using Kakine Teitoku as the starting point.

It could be said to be similar to a computer infected with a virus that would activate when the computer rebooted.

Once that was done, one need only wait until the inevitable freeze. The passage of time and buildup of work would ultimately lead Rhinoceros Beetle 05 into a catastrophic situation.

"You must have understood this from the beginning," announced that someone with a mocking tone. He announced the decisive factor. "Your greatest enemy was not Fräulein Kreutune or the enemy beetles sent by Kakine Teitoku. It was yourself after you gained the trust of the targets and remained physically nearby. …You must have had the opportunity to explain this to the targets, but you told them there were only two threats, didn't you? Why? It wasn't because you could deny this possibility. It was because you would be forced to think about it if you put it in words."

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 searched for the words to deny it.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 searched for the words to deny it.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 searched for the words to deny it.

But Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was unable to speak a single word in response. Of course it could not. This was not a game where multiple players revealed their hidden cards on the table one at a time. All of the cards were known and the beetle was going over the answers *all on its own.*

And so it could not stop the words of that someone.

The words merely continued.

"It is easy enough to claim to be someone other than Kakine Teitoku. But who are you really? Can you truly define yourself with some other name? The titles you have acquired in this short time are 'someone opposing Kakine Teitoku's orders', 'someone working to become independent of Kakine Teitoku', 'someone who wants to become something other than Kakine Teitoku', and 'someone who originated from Kakine Teitoku'. No matter how hard you try to get around it, you cannot escape the name Kakine Teitoku. If you force yourself to deny your very core, you will lose your essence and be unable to even define what your physical body is."

He did it so easily.

He did it so definitively.

He crushed the budding hope that Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had obtained.

"That is why your true essence is that of a slave. No matter how much you struggle, you cannot reboot yourself as a new type of master."

If Rhinoceros Beetle 05 did not become something other than Kakine Teitoku, it could not refuse the order to kill Last Order and Fremea Seivelun.

But no matter what it did, it could not completely reject Kakine Teitoku.

Ergo…

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 could not protect those two girls.

“It is simple logic,” whispered that someone. “As long as you are a part of Kakine Teitoku, you cannot hesitate to kill your proper target. If you are hesitating, that reluctance to kill must be coming from some portion that is not Kakine Teitoku. There is something you have gained in this short time…something that the targets trust. When you decide to kill using that excess portion of yourself, you determine that you are ‘betraying’ the targets.”

He was about to speak a decisive statement.

He had made the running start to get there.

“So release yourself from those conditions.”

That someone spoke those words that were like a password to release the safety device on some giant weapon.

“Let this kind Kakine Teitoku forcibly give you your orders. Kill the targets while selfishly resenting me.”

The conclusion was clear.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 could not become something other than Kakine Teitoku.

No matter what.

Part 12

Countless spears shot from the white puddle filling one section of the underground passageway. They accurately targeted Accelerator and Mugino Shizuri. They would be difficult to evade. And even if they succeeded, they had nowhere left to go. Kakine Teitoku’s ultimate creation ability gave him as much time, resources, and physical strength as he wanted. He was the worst possible enemy for Accelerator and Mugino Shizuri who had instantaneous firepower in the form of explosive destructive power.

They would eventually reach their limit, they would eventually find themselves cornered, and they would eventually lose their lives.

Kakine Teitoku did not have to worry about when or where that eventuality occurred. He only needed to wait for its arrival no matter how long it took. He did not have to worry about his own consumption. If he merely waited for victory to come his way, his wish would be granted. It was the ultimate wastefulness, the ultimate laziness, and the ultimate desecration. The #2 had gained the ability to extend the idea of 'sitting and waiting' to a level where it threatened to bring humanity to extinction.

That may have been the source of the subconscious fear people throughout history had felt towards Fräulein Kreutune.

It did not matter if she was actually able to do it.

It did not matter if she had any intention of doing it.

People just felt Fräulein Kreutune *might* do it.

Those people had originally been able to gently smile, but that thought was all it had taken for all of their morals to be thoroughly worn down, gouged out, stolen, and crushed. That idea was simply too frightening.

If it had ever actually budded, billions of people would have stood up to it, but could what was nothing more than a collection of individuals truly stand up to that?

And now someone embodied that idea using a different method.

That person was Kakine Teitoku.

Those malice-filled spears and their points filled with murderous intent were produced infinitely and rushed towards their targets. Simply by repeating those countless attacks, he could safely and surely pierce his opponents if he waited long enough.

"What was the point of it all? Now that it comes to the end, I just have to wonder. The #1, the #2, the #3, the #4, the #5, the #6, and the #7… How ridiculous. So this is what it is like to leave the realm of what can be counted with numbers. I guess that was the extent of Academy City's society."

The #1 and the #4 could do nothing.

It did not matter how much talent they had or how much effort they put into extending their ability.

"I guess winning is not always a good thing. It can be disappointing. Finding out how low the wall was can be truly disappointing. I suppose I learned one thing from killing you worms."

By repeating that simple task over and over again, he would knock down and wash away the human culture that had been built up so carefully.

Or so it should have been.

The giant system that was Kakine Teitoku suddenly stopped.

"?"

A look of confusion appeared on Kakine's own face.

The points of the expanding spears stopped just before reaching Accelerator and Mugino Shizuri.

One of Mugino's eyebrows moved and she said, "Hey, what's going on? Does this mean it's okay for me to smash you to pieces? Of course, whether your answer is yes or no, I'll be turning you to ash."

"What?" quietly muttered Academy City's #2 monster as if the word had just slipped out.

No…

His lips could no longer make any movement greater than a slight tremble.

"The transmission rate is…? But…the material data system signal…hasn't changed. It can't have changed…"

"…"

Accelerator alone remained silent.

The #1 had been continually using his control over all vectors to attack the system that was Kakine Teitoku from within.

That was the only conceivable possibility.

"It can't have… It can't have changed…and yet… What did you do? Even if you interfered with the Dark Matter's internal lines…even if you reversed the signals, you shouldn't have been able to make it past that individual block. And yet… What…what did you-…!?"

"Oh, I get it." Finally, Accelerator spoke as if it did not matter. "I guess it was a part those infinite possibilities you were talking about. I see, I see… Heh heh, that makes sense. I find it hard to believe a fragment like that would appear within you, but you did say it was infinite. Something like that must've gotten mixed into that network of yours."

"What are you… What are you talking about!?"

"*It wasn't me,*" replied Accelerator.

His response was the simplest response there was.

"*I'd say it was you that stopped you.*"

At that moment…

“Nyah. What’s the matter?”

The white Rhinoceros Beetle 05, Last Order, and Fremea waited near the multilevel overpass while watching for a chance to approach the intense battles there.

But…

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was unable to respond to Fremea’s question.

Its consciousness was focused on the image of Kakine Teitoku that only it could see.

“…I see…”

“That’s right,” responded the image.

“So…that’s it…”

“So what will you do?”

Its thick horn-like main cannon slowly moved. Its aim wavered. As the master, Kakine Teitoku was giving a command to Rhinoceros Beetle 05 who was the slave. He was commanding it to quickly kill the two girls who stood nearby.

The only way to escape the basic order to kill was to acquire a personality beyond Kakine Teitoku.

But Rhinoceros Beetle 05 was nothing but a slave, so it would break apart the instant it lost the supporting pillar of Kakine Teitoku.

Therefore, Rhinoceros Beetle 05 could not reject the order to kill.

The formula was perfectly sound.

However…

“I never had to become anything other than Kakine Teitoku,” said the beetle.

“What…?”

“There was never any need to forcibly think about acquiring a new personality.”

“Wait a second. That response was not in the preset version of Kakine Teitoku!!”

The sound of cracks running across the beetle’s body rang out.

The red light in its eyes flickered unstably like a malfunctioning light.

“I…”

The cracks had finally become visible on the outside of its body.

It was as if those cracks were in payment for resisting something.

But it did not stop.

Rhinoceros Beetle 05 did not stop speaking.

“I am…!!”

Suddenly, the red light in Rhinoceros Beetle 05’s eyes completely disappeared.

It had ceased to function.

Or so it appeared.

But that was not the case.

“My name is…”

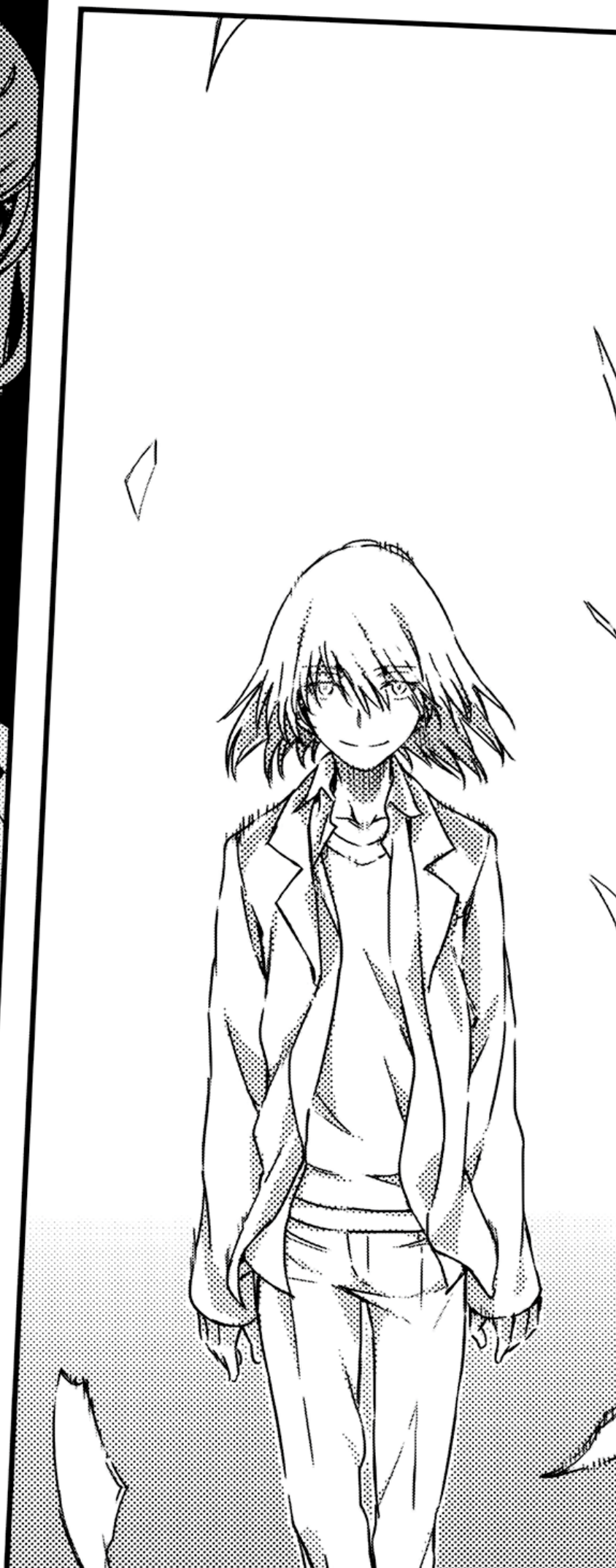
The light came back on immediately afterwards. But it had changed from red to green. The previous coloration that had indicated an error became a vivid green as if to announce it was now running properly.

“My name is Kakine Teitoku, Academy City’s #2 Level 5 and the user of Dark Matter.”

Some might have described it as a flower blooming.

The cracks continued to appear from within the white Rhinoceros Beetle 05. Without hesitation and without indecision, the beetle completely shattered. And what appeared from within those glittering fragmentary particles was…

A single white boy with a green light in his eyes.



A small cracking noise could be heard.

It had come from Kakine's handsome face in that underground passageway he had complete control over. More accurately, it came from the small crack that had appeared at the corner of his mouth.

"Don't…mock me…"

He groaned.

He muttered.

That was all he could manage any longer as authority over the giant system that was Kakine Teitoku began to transfer elsewhere, but "the thing he had been" shook off that restriction and shouted with all of his strength.

For better or for worse, the strength of his will may have been one of the reasons the #2 had been able to climb so high.

His handsome mouth split apart and his entire face opened and closed like a cheap toy.

"Don't mock meeeeeeee!! Th-this is…This is all mine. I am me!! D-Dark Matter is produced from my brain…from my Personal Reality. How could that…how could the power I brought about myself betray me like this!?"

"It no longer matters who was first," said Accelerator as if he was singing. "What the flesh-and-blood organs connect to is no longer an issue. You obtained the infinite, so you broke past the need for that kind of thing, right?"

"…!!"

The throat belonging to that which had been Kakine convulsed.

Mugino finally caught on to what was happening and tension left her shoulders.

"Ha ha. Being too powerful is its own problem, #2. When a network made up of flexibly replaceable equipment has a portion become isolated from the rest, the isolated portion becomes a small network of its own. And you have the ability to replace lost body parts like a planarian. In other words…"

"The one who stopped him is also Kakine Teitoku. …Or may be it would be better to say the one who stopped him is now *the* Kakine Teitoku," said Accelerator.

It was only during that last statement that Accelerator did not smile.

He showed his respect for someone he had never seen who was not there at the moment.

“There had to have been a lot of different things that made up the whole of Kakine Teitoku. And a lot of those things would normally be invisible due to the *great concentration of the whole.* But when the network became isolated, things not normally seen rose to the surface. Like the gum syrup built up at the bottom of an iced coffee being scooped out.”

“There would have been the cowardly side of you, the short tempered side of you, the vain side of you…and the kind side of you. But who would have thought it would be this form of the #2 that would wrest control away from the rest?”

The desire to protect someone had won out over the desire to kill someone.

The desire to create something had won out over the desire to destroy something.

The desire to stop a fight had won out over the desire to continue a fight.

“I take back what I said,” said Accelerator without hesitation. That was something he did not often say. “Academy City’s #2 esper power of Dark Matter is one hell of a power. *It was wasted on the likes of you. And it was clearly too much for you to control.*”

“Ah…ah…”

“Come to think of it,” added Mugino Shizuri with a puzzled look. “Do we have any proof that this one was actually the core? The #2’s mind was scattered over the system, and this one was the closest to the surface. *But nothing says what showed itself on the surface was Kakine Teitoku’s true nature.* Weren’t we just battling the very outer layer of his mind this whole time? Then again, even just that was no easy task, so I guess the #2 really is no normal person. …Oh, and make no mistake. I wasn’t complimenting *you* when I said that. I was talking about the real one.”

“Aaaaahhhhh!!
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Each time the thing that had been Kakine forced his body to move, more and more small cracks formed. He was trying to kill Accelerator and Mugino Shizuri by any means necessary. So that he could stop them from speaking. So that he could avert his gaze from that uncomfortable information.

But he could not manage it.

That final bit of power must have finally been taken from him. It may have been a mistake that he had held that power at all, even if temporarily.

A high-pitched noise rang out.

A certain line had been crossed.

A portion of the spears broke and the destruction continued in a chain reaction. Everything that made up the thing that had been Kakine noisily crumbled. Just like a child grew into an adult and just like an adult grew into a parent, that giant system grew into something more refined by eliminating the immature portions that remained even in the core of the personality.

"I…I'm dis…I'm disappearing? I…I am…Academy City's #2…no, I went beyond that… Why is this happing…for such a ridiculous reason?"

"There will probably be nothing left to prove you were ever here," whispered Accelerator. That someone who was continuing to collapse clearly twitched when he heard that. "Even if a massive amount of data is left concerning Kakine Teitoku, that data will not be referring to you."

Those were his words.

Those were the words the living could pass onto the dead who would disappear from this world.

"But don't worry."

"Wait…no…stop…"

There was nothing he could do in that final moment.

But the thing that had been Kakine had a sudden thought.

He recalled the moment in that subway tunnel when that white Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had suddenly left his control and taken an irregular action.

He did not think that beetle had been given anything special. He had not set it up that way. The issue was who had been in that same location at that time.

A certain girl wearing a pink track suit.

Takitsubo Rikou.

She was a Level 4 with the ability to track others' AIM diffusion fields, and she also held the hidden possibility of using others' AIM diffusion fields to distort their Personal Realities.

Hadn't Kakine Teitoku once made the following estimation of that girl?

She might one day grow to be the eighth of the currently seven Level 5s.

In that case…

Whether consciously or subconsciously, the one who had incited the change in the white Rhinoceros Beetle 05 had been…

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! H-her!! That biiiiiiiiiiiiiiiittttttttttttttcccccccccchhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

The #1 monster ignored that someone who suddenly cried out.

He said, “If you wish to leave some evidence behind, I will make a mark for you.”

The entire underground passageway shook so roughly it seemed like the very foundation would break.

His five fingers pierced through the center of that something that was just barely maintaining its form and it finally completely shattered.

Accelerator brought his hand to his own neck.

He flipped the switch for his choker-style electrode to deactivate his powers.

While supporting his weight with his modern cane, the #1 looked around the area. With no one left to command it, the Dark Matter began dissolving into the air, leaving nothing behind.

“…So it’s over.”

“What’s over?” said Mugino Shizuri with a shrug.

She spoke as if all that intense fighting had been nothing but a quick glimpse of scenery on the way to their destination.

“We still have a long way to go. The path ahead is especially long for those of us who have killed.”

Part 13

Kamijou Touma forced his aching body along and prepared his right fist.

He was facing Leivinia Birdway.

She was a magician that could give fire, water, wind, and earth the form of deadly weapons just by swinging her form-changing symbolic weapon. She could also take the quickest route and forcibly send out a mass of that power before aligning it with an element to create a white summoned explosion.

She had a great variety of attacks and they all possessed great destructive power.

In a past event Kamijou had been involved in, it seemed she had worn down the organized power of a magic cabal and led it to destruction using nothing but those summoned explosions.

But…

At the same time…

(Her secret probably isn't the strength of her power.)

Kamijou knew little of magic, but he had picked up on some information during his long battles.

Magicians that could use massive amounts of unrestricted power from the beginning did indeed exist. For example, the Saints, the second princess of England who wielded the royal sword Curtana Original, or Fiamma of the Right who possessed the power to save the world. Those magicians could overcome an opponent with pure power alone. They may have been using up something with their attacks, but they were able to continue those overwhelming attacks to the point that it might as well have been infinite. That was just how they were.

But he had never heard anything about Birdway being that way.

He had heard she was the leader of a giant magic cabal and he had also heard magic was used to make up for a lack of natural talent using techniques. If Birdway was the head of a group that formed due to that fact…

(It's the opposite. Birdway's own strength is no greater than normal. …Without something completely crazy like being a Saint or having Curtana, there is little meaning in pushing up your own strength. That must just be how magicians are.)

So he had to think about it in reverse.

He had to figure out how she was creating such tremendous results with a normal level of power.

And in that case, the answer was very simple.

(It's a trick.)

That was the only word he could think of to describe it.

This was not simple equivalent exchange where 1 unit of power led to 1 unit of results.

This was a crazy trick like some monstrous financial deal that took a single unit and raised it up to a thousand or even ten thousand units.

A warrior could charge in with a sword and shield made of bronze or a warrior could operate a touchscreen to send GPS precision guided missiles raining down. It was the same number of people, but the level of technology could easily push the amount of power he wielded up to cruel levels. Magicians always talked about gaining power via intelligence, so they would surely be ranked according to that.

And the most extreme example was…

Index who they viewed as highly dangerous due to the library of 103,000 grimoires she possessed.

(In that case, what is she doing? If I can destroy whatever Birdway is doing, I should be able to rob her of these hopeless attack methods... The first thing to come to mind is that form-changing symbolic weapon, but is it really that simple? *If this method is what she is entrusting her life to while taking on the world, she would never let it be contained in a small handheld system like that*.)

"What is it?"

Birdway changed the form of the symbolic weapon in her hand once more.

It now became a sword.

"Are you truly prepared to kill me now? Then hurry up. And if you refuse to attack first, I will."

Kamijou did not even have time to respond.

She moved.

She came in for the attack.

It started with a wind sword attempting to cut off his right arm.

Using the line being torn into the asphalt road surface as a sign, Kamijou moved to evade it rather than blowing it away with his right hand. He twisted his body to the side like he was heading for the exit in a crowded train. He used the same action to take a step forward and accelerate towards Birdway.

(Stiyl Magnus amplified the phenomenon he created by placing a ton of rune cards around the battlefield.)

The magician's weapon had already changed from a sword to a wand.

She held the wand out horizontally and spun it around once. As soon as she did, a disk of fire was created along the path it took. It expanded all at once and became a scorching wall that moved towards Kamijou.

(Yamisaka Ouma created a rope barrier to create a ceremonial grounds, Sherry Cromwell used a bunch of symbols to make the underground mall crumble, and Biagio Busoni prepared a large fleet to destroy Academy City.)

By the time he destroyed the wall of flames with his right hand, Birdway had already transformed the wand into a cup. A large tree of water appeared with her at the center and a large number of daggers grew from its branches and rained down on the area.

(There has to be something. Something that lets her carry out these extraordinary attacks! I don't know if it's a matter of numbers or scope, but there has to be something supporting Birdway!!)

He negated one of the countless daggers that had been fired and the fragments of the destroyed dagger diverted the trajectory of the other nearby daggers.

With that safe area created, Kamijou was able to get in range of Birdway.

He still did not have his answer.

But if he had to decide what to target with his fist…

"Dammit, I guess it has to be that symbolic weapon!!"

"I thought that's what you would choose."

Kamijou felt a dull shock and the fist headed straight for Birdway's weapon was knocked to the side.

It had gone from a cup to a sword.

And the wind sword created had been sent at Kamijou's right fist rather than his body.

It was the same as how Kamijou had used the fact that her magic was too powerful to completely negate.

Birdway sent powerful magic at his right hand to alter its trajectory.

(Not…good…)

An unpleasant chill ran down Kamijou's back.

His trusty right fist had lost all meaning at the last moment. Kamijou had already run right up to her and that also meant Birdway could attack him from point blank range. She could get a clean hit with any magic and any attack.

And she took action without hesitation.

"You were naïve to the end. Naïve to assume others are as goodhearted as you!!"

She swung the sword.

She swung it down from above.

And a giant wind blade appeared along that path and headed straight for Kamijou.

Kamijou practically collapsed to the side to avoid it and it just barely missed him.

(…What?)

He had survived. But he felt more confusion than he did relief.

Birdway must have felt safer when his fist could not reach her because she took two or three steps backwards. She must have carried out some kind of ceremony as she did so because several pure white summoned explosions exploded around where Kamijou lay on the ground.

He frantically created a safe area by receiving one explosion with his right hand and sending the explosive energy towards another explosion so they would cancel each other out. As he did so, his thoughts put together the puzzle at an accelerated rate.

(It wasn't thanks to my own ability that I managed to avoid that. It was because she chose an attack I've seen before. But why? She can put spells together in so many different forms, so she should have been able to use any number of attacks I've never seen before. If she had done that, I would have been swallowed up because I couldn't have reacted in time!!)

A wall of flames and a storm of stone knives headed his way, but Kamijou easily dealt with them using his right hand after standing back up. *He knew those too.*

And that meant…

(*It isn't that she could have done something else but didn't. Was that all she could do?*)

"…I've figured it out."

A high-pitched noise rang out.

It was the sound of the stone knives shattering when Kamijou swung his right hand horizontally.

He was not merely ad-libbing a means of dealing with the attacking spells. This time, he knew it was no coincidence.

"I don't actually know if it's possible and I have no real evidence to back it up, but I've figured it out. Birdway, this is what lies at the core of your

attacks. This is the source of what has turned you into someone extraordinary."

"What do you know, amateur?"

"What makes you special is numbers. It's like the rune cards Stiyl uses." Kamijou once again accurately blew away a wind sword. "*You always use the same spells with the same motions.* That's the answer. You have repeatedly done the same thing for a long time and it has built up. By making the exact same motions in the exact same way, you turn those very motions themselves into magical symbols to support you! Yourself a year ago, yourself a month ago, yourself a week ago, yourself a day ago, and yourself an hour ago. Those are the symbols you use!!"

But that was not something all magicians would be able to do.

Her motions were "the same" on a different level altogether.

If someone tried to copy their own handwriting from the past, could they reproduce it perfectly? This was the technique to forcibly draw out overwhelming results by remaining on the existing course and never being able to leave the category of "oneself" no matter how restrictive and disadvantageous that could be.

What she had built up was what made her powerful.

She had taken what everyone understood as an idea or as a concept and raised it up into its ultimate form as a real phenomenon.

She stood at the very top of those who attempted to gain the power to take on the world by polishing and improving their skills.

"You really are amazing. Especially in the way you don't show it off. You put on a cool expression and pretend to look down on the world with a cold heart, but *you are actually the most passionate and the hardest working one.* You embody the hope that people will eventually be rewarded if they put in enough effort."

She took on a different form from Kamijou Touma who spoke and listened in a conflict of beliefs.

Leivinia Birdway made no simple comments and yet displayed success with her actions. She showed that people could come that far based on nothing but their own efforts. That was what led people to be fascinated by her and prevented any of them from disputing whether she was worthy to stand at the top of a giant magic cabal.

But…

In that case…

“Do you really think that’s the answer?” Birdway transformed her symbolic weapon from a sword to a wand and casually pointed it towards Kamijou. “Were you hoping to find a structure that simple inside me? I control the largest magic cabal in England, the Dawn-Colored Sunlight!! I am always searching for something new whether it is from science or magic!!”

A flash of light surged out.

It was a summoned explosion.

The way Birdway did not rely on the strict techniques of spells or ceremonies and instead shortened and simplified that technique as if ad-libbing was the proof of how non-standard she was.

But…

“In the end, that’s the same. It’s the improvised, ad-libbed, off the cuff, and freestyle concert encore version. …You make it appear to be all those things, *but it is actually a calculated action where you accurately repeat the proper technique.* You arranged it that way to hide the fact that you can only use fire, water, wind, and earth magic using set actions!! I’m sure you could create new spells if you wanted, but then you would have to work your way up from nothing!

You can’t use anything new in battle right away!!”

He could break through.

He could handle it all with just his right hand.

He could oppose the same attack with the same method.

It was like a giant plantation intentionally filled with a single crop through selective breeding being wiped out by a single type of insect.

“The real knife hidden in with the stone knives and the flintlock pistol pulled from the back were means of betraying my expectations to make me think there was more to Leivinia Birdway than there is! You were trying to make it look like you had such a free range of attacks that it was pointless to count them all!!”

He did not tremble.

The fear that caused it could not be found within him.

He had found the clue he needed to achieve victory.

That confidence gave him the strength to clench his fist even tighter.

“How many cards do you have in your hand, Birdway?”

“What does it matter to you?”

“Is it 5? 10? 15? 20? No matter the number, it doesn’t matter. You don’t have an endless array of attacks; you have a limited number. *I doubt I’ve seen them all,* but I don’t have time to figure out how to handle all of them.”

“Then you can go to your grave with this misunderstanding.”

A great noise exploded out.

It was the sound of Kamijou kicking off the road surface and running toward Birdway.

Birdway did not take any further steps back.

She would meet him where she was.

(It’s no good, Birdway.)

A downpour of water daggers rained down, a flame wall blocked his path, a wind sword tried to slice through the entire area. Summoned explosions appeared to fill the gaps between attacks. A steel blade rotated like a giant electric fan and an electric attack bounced around the area like a pinball. A few of the attacks were things Kamijou had not seen before, but it was not enough to corner him. He found ways to deal with them, and cornered Birdway who was losing a card from her limited hand each time he did so.

(I think I know what type of person you are now. You love effort and do not turn away from hard work… *You have not tried even once to target the weak point on my side where I was shot.* You have charmed the people who support a large organization with something other than your words.)

He negated many different forms of magic, he blew away many different spells, and he took advantage of many different forms of attacks.

All the while, Kamijou Touma ran forward.

His vision opened up.

This time, he had truly made it up to Leivinia Birdway.

“You are…!! You are the person who taught so many people that hard work will carry you to the top! I can’t let you come to the pathetic answer that using Fräulein Kreutune is the best option!! I can’t!!”

His means of attack were limited to just one.

But he constantly reached that one means out towards what he could not reach, touched that which was said to be impossible, and grabbed at something that was not there.

His hand and its five fingers could freely make any number of forms.

It now took the form of a fist.

It happened immediately afterwards.

Kamijou Touma and Leivinia Birdway arrived at the same spot.

And the conclusion was reached.

Part 14

"…?"

On the top level of the multilevel overpass, Misaka Mikoto frowned where she stood on the road that was falling apart.

Brunhild Eiktobel had suddenly stopped those movements which contained such monstrous power. Even when Mikoto had magnetized her giant steel sword using a high voltage current so that all sorts of iron objects flew to it, the woman had used brute strength to continue to swing around that mass that had to weigh a dozen tons. But now she froze in place.

Her gaze moved from her opponent and off to some other place.

Mikoto did not view it as an opening. It was an uncomfortable silence like a bomb's timer had reached zero yet did not explode. She felt something that made her hesitant to carelessly attack, so she called out to the woman despite how out of place it was to do so.

"Is something the matter?"

"It seems one issue has been resolved," replied Brunhild quietly. "I am not sure if I should continue fighting, head over as reinforcements, or view the situation as unfavorable and make preparations to reorganize."

On the sports-arena-like area one level down, Lightning God Thor and Silvia, the Saint he was confronting, were also looking off elsewhere. However, the two of them looked less confused and more appeared to be enjoying an unexpected outcome.

"Hm, what to do now?" said Silvia with the tone of someone trying to decide whether to hang up laundry when the sky was partly cloudy. "It looks like I just received justification to abandon a job that was necessary but that I was less than delighted to carry out. So what am I to do now?"

"If two Saints went after him, I'm betting you could manage somehow."

"No," replied Silvia despite having no obligation to give an honest answer. "All we need to rob Fräulein Kreutune of her power is a spell that adds a pinch of sand to the pure water that has such special behavior. But that is Leivinia Birdway's specialty. She did not fully trust us. She wanted to keep

that technique a secret, so there is nothing we can do now that she has been broken."

This was not an environment where they could simply retrieve Birdway and continue their plan.

There was nothing they could do if the sole person who could carry out the spell had lost her will to use it.

That was what Silvia meant.

She scratched at her head while gathering up her long rope with the movements of a single hand.

"Dammit, this is why I said I wished I was on your side this time. *Then I could have had an all-out fight without having to worry about anything.*"

Thor grinned when he heard that.

"It's still not too late."

"Idiot," spat out Silvia with a hint of regret. "I am not like you. I have some comfortable bonds. I have my bonds with an unreliable bastard who is negligent and a crybaby despite very nearly reaching the realm of a Magic God."

"I am a bit jealous of that." replied Thor honestly. He shrugged as he said it, but that alone was sincere. "I've given everything my all to make it as far as I have, but I've never been able to find that. And that's why I am standing here."

The action they both took was quite simple.

They took a step back from each other.

That was enough to leave the complexly interwoven situation. That action signified a disarmament where the game pieces that had been optimally set up to achieve checkmate were moved to completely meaningless positions on the board.

It was a sense that only those who had headed far enough down a certain path could detect.

They gave that signal because they knew their enemy was powerful enough to recognize it.

"We will withdraw now," said Silvia with a smile to the person who was no longer her enemy. "But be careful. If what I hear is true, Fräulein Kreutune is a fully fledged monster. And that holds true regardless of how you try to treat her. A lion at the zoo will suddenly bare its fangs to the zookeeper who has been by its side for many long years. Even if the lion has no intention of

doing so, its animalistic instincts and conditioned reflexes can overpower the 'safety zone' created by the attachment and experience it has learned. …Humans are in the most danger when they think everything falls into their own framework. Even if the lion has no malice or hostility, it can give the zookeeper a deadly wound when all it is trying to do is ask for food or play around."

"I know that," replied Thor quietly. But despite understanding Silvia's warning, he still added, "But we are the people that gathered due to our dislike of calling her a wild beast and throwing her in a cage. We're all big enough fools to be willing to risk our lives a bit for her sake. So that warning changes nothing. …We will rescue Fräulein Kreutune. That is our answer."

Part 15

And…

While looking out for a chance to approach Fräulein Kreutune from near the multilevel overpass, the white Rhinoceros Beetle…no, Kakine Teitoku opened his mouth to speak.

"It appears to be over."

"Then let's go!! Let's go save our friend! Nyah, nyah!!"

"That's right, says Misaka as Misaka replies too."

But he had his own worries.

"The battles on the multilevel overpass are over, but the threat of Fräulein Kreutune herself has not changed. Are you really going?"

She was a living creature that was trying to achieve eclosion by seizing control of a giant information network by eating a certain girl's brain. That was what Fräulein Kreutune was. No matter how much one tried to beautify it, that truth would not change and that function of hers could not be changed.

Some pet enthusiasts who preferred oddities would tame venomous snakes and let them wrap around their bodies. Some would live with wild beasts and climb on their backs.

But human rules did not apply there.

Those reckless actions only worked when the animal's rules were met. The instant one set foot outside those rules, the wild beast would not hesitate to

devour its owner and the venomous snake would sink its fangs into its owner's arm.

One could try to compromise.

One could try to make friends with them.

One could promise that everything would be okay.

But those words could not stop that function. No matter how much they had built up with her ahead of time, the instant Fräulein Kreutune's inherent rules activated, the possibility that she would cast all that aside and attack was not zero. It was not an issue of the good or evil in Fräulein Kreutune's heart. It was just the simple truth that she was a living creature with that function. That was why it was so powerful and that was why no one could judge her for it. Or rather, nothing would change even if they did judge her for it.

If you put a venomous snake or wild beast in jail after they attacked someone, would they reflect on what they had done? And even if they did reflect on it, would that do anything to keep their instincts and conditioned reflexes from making them attack someone again?

That was why he warned them.

Would their actions have any meaning?

And even if they did…even if some small miracle occurred, wouldn't that be nothing but a small boat in the middle of the stormy ocean? Would it lead to any real safety?

"Don't worry," said Last Order. "She is probably the same as you and Misaka. She probably does not know for sure what she is or even who she can ask to find out, says Misaka as Misaka states her prediction. But that is why someone needs to save her. You can stay here if you wish, says Misaka as Misaka gives her conclusion."

"In the first place, what do you mean she doesn't know what she is!?"

Fremea raised her voice despite likely not knowing what the other girl had meant by that.

Even so, her words struck at the center of the issue.

"She is a member of the Hamazura Brigade and our friend! Nyah!! So what are you talking about? What more could she need to know!?"

That which had become Kakine Teitoku and the command tower named Last Order fell silent.

They felt like the ability to accept someone simply as a friend even in such a complex situation and to do it like it was completely normal held some kind of great meaning.

Kakine Teitoku then resolved himself.

He made up his mind.

“Let’s go. We need to save your friend.”

“Nyah! Don’t you mean ‘our’ friend!?”

Kakine stepped in front of Last Order and Fremea and proceeded carefully forward.

Last Order pulled out her cell phone.

“In the first place, what are you doing?”

“Telling her we’re on our way, says Misaka as Misaka gives her reply. The security buzzer we gave her can receive emails, says Misaka as Misaka quickly moves her thumb.”

Part 16

Fräulein Kreutune leaned up against a guardrail in the arena-like part of the multilevel overpass. She noticed a change. Something began vibrating within her clothes.

She pulled out a small egg-shaped device.

It was the supposed proof of friendship she had been given.

“…”

Some small words were displayed on the screen.

That was all it was, yet it was filled with something warm. It was overflowing with something that had been missing in Fräulein Kreutune’s long, long, much too long time on this earth.

Thinly.

Very thinly.

Her lips moved.

That may have been the rarest thing for her in her life. Even if it had appeared on her face before with no meaning or thoughts while she emulated someone’s movements as a part of her repeated simple thoughts

leading her in the most comfortable direction, these movements of her facial muscles may have come from somewhere entirely different.

"…Thank you," she muttered.

Those words naturally slipped from Fräulein Kreutune's mouth.

"Thank you so much."

She closed her hand around the small egg-shaped piece of plastic.

There was strength in her grip.

While still hanging her head down, she continued to speak.

She spoke a definitive statement.

"But I still cannot stop myself from eating you!!"

And finally…

The time came.

It was incredibly simple.

And yet there was nothing she could do to stop that horrible conclusion that was about to bloom.

Part 17

Kakine Teitoku…or rather, that which had been him…or had it simply been a portion of the outer layer of him? At any rate, the person who had used Dark Matter had been defeated by Accelerator and Mugino Shizuri. They headed up a stairway to leave the underground passageways and arrive on the aboveground portion of the multilevel overpass.

"Are you going to do anything about this Fräulein something-or-other?" asked Mugino.

"I don't care. But it seems someone I know doesn't want her to die. This person risked herself to stop me when I tried to kill that Fräulein person."

"Same here. It doesn't really affect anyone whether she's saved or killed though, so I'm not so sure it matters."

As they spoke, they made their way out into the sunlight.

The sounds and vibrations of battle had ended. Something must have come to an end. And if anything was still smoldering, they would stamp it out before moving on.

Accelerator had been looking around the area, but then he spotted something.

He gave it a second look.

He saw a tall, white figure.

"…Hey," said Mugino as if she had seen something disturbing. "What is that?"

One level above ground level was an irregular overpass that spread out like a sports arena to connect the different stops of a giant bus roundabout. The figure had long silver hair that covered her face and wore a dress-like outfit made of a thin white material. Accelerator recognized her. He had lightly held her in check when she had tried to attack Last Order.

That much was fine.

The problem was…

She was sitting down with her head hanging down, she was in a balled up position…and she was covered in something.

It covered her hands and her chest.

And it covered her mouth and her teeth.

Whatever it was, it was closer to pink than it was a pure red. It was too soft to be meat. He could hear a wet chewing sound as Fräulein Kreutune's jaw moved. She bit into something, chewed, and swallowed.

"What…is that?"

Even Mugino who had been involved more deeply in death than the average person could only mutter that in dumbfounded shock.

Accelerator was unable to respond.

Something like static had appeared at one point in his head. In no time at all, it spread explosively and filled every inch of his mind.

He could not move.

And that was why he was unable to stop the #4's words.

"I'm not an expert…*but that looks like a human brain to me.*"

Who had Fräulein Kreutune been targeting?

What if this had been the ultimate objective of her actions?

So…

What was it she was eating?

Where was that brat?

“Ah…”

Something suddenly exceeded its capacity. Something that had been building up completely collapsed from a single blow and Accelerator’s mind was filled with nothing but the color red.

“Aaaa

It began with Misaka Mikoto after the Lightning God Thor egged her on. He had said something along the lines of "Hey, Miko-chan, Kamijou Touma is doing his usual thing by being nursed to health by some mysterious little blonde girl. What do you think about that?" and she had barged in on that spiky-haired boy without hesitation.

With bluish-white sparks flying from her bangs, she said, "First you leave me behind at Hawaii, then you suddenly grope my chest when we meet again, and now you're flirting with some girl like it's a normal thing! Do you never think about explaining anything or apologizing for anything!?"

As she shouted, she fired a lightning spear and Kamijou Touma collapsed to the side.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl standing next to him shook her head and said something in French.

"Life is always a sudden thing. It is possible it could end right here. But I think it is only fair that I get a bit angry if such a coincidence occurred. This is my precious clue leading to Gremlin."

"Huh!? What was that? You usually block it so easily…geh!? You've been shot in the stomach!? Why didn't you say so!?"

As he lay collapsed and convulsing on the ground due to her much too unreasonable demand, Kamijou asked one thing of Mikoto.

He asked her to translate for him since he did not understand French.

The blood flowing from his side made Mikoto feel fairly guilty, so she did as she was told while still confused about the situation.

"Um…What? 'Due to being reconstructed to my normal body after being turned into a human table, I can now freely disassemble and reconstruct my body'? N-no!! That's not a mistranslation. That's really what she's saying!!"

"I-I get the general idea. I see…but that's just crazy. Even if you had to slip past Academy City's security, breaking your body down like that is crazy…"

It seemed they had come to some odd form of understanding.

A hint of jealousy appeared on Mikoto's face, but what they were talking about was so brutal she did not particularly want to know much more.

"How did she get that small?"

"Um… 'I broke my body down to the level of a few food ingredients to carry it in, but the person who prepared me did not follow the recipe so some of the ingredients were left over'? …??? Eh? Wait a second… What are you-…?"

"Left over?"

Kamijou frowned and listened while still collapsed on the ground.

But then he sprang up into a sitting position.

“Did you say some were left over!? *So we have some ingredients to a human body that can be freely made into whatever we want at least to a certain extent?* And we have the person who knows how to use them too. Wait…In that case!!”

“?”

“Hey, Mikoto! Tell Cendrillon this: I want your help. With your ingredients and skills, we might be able to save Fräulein Kreutune from having to eat someone’s brain!!”

“W-what!? Cendrillon? But wasn’t she the one who went on a rampage in that Hawaiian airport…ehh!? But isn’t she smaller than before…!?”

“Hurry!!”

As Mikoto gave that explanation while still confused, a somber look came over the face of the mysterious short girl named Cendrillon.

Mikoto somehow managed to put her French words into Japanese.

“I doubt that detour would help with my goal. I must take my revenge against Marian Slingeneyer for deceiving me. And those ingredients are a part of me. If they are used for something else, I will no longer be able to remake myself back to normal.”

“Eh?” said Kamijou without thinking. “Marian Slingeneyer? I defeated her back in Baggage City.”

Mikoto continued to translate as if on auto-pilot (She felt like her mind would burst if she did not immerse herself in something) and the small Cendrillon suddenly grabbed at Kamijou despite the words she understood coming from Mikoto. She started shouting something in French that the boy could of course not understand while shaking his head back and forth.

“G-gbh!? Explanation please!!”

“U-umm… ‘What have you done!? That is clearly beyond the level of what you should be doing!!’ ”

“It just kind happened! I couldn’t help it!!”

After grabbing at his collar with both hands for a while, Cendrillon finally realized that would not change the situation. She let out a heavy sigh and released him.

And then she said something very dangerous in French.

Mikoto translated it.

“I see, so the target of my revenge is already dead. In that case, I guess I have no reason to remain fixated over that.”

“Hm? What???”

Kamijou did not remember saying anything about killing her, but he decided not to correct her. There were some things people were better off not knowing.

Cendrillon clicked her tongue and said, “Not only did you save my life in Baggage City, but now you freed me from the revenge I would have sullied my hands with. Ugh, you were supposed to be my enemy, so why do I keep growing more and more indebted to you…?”

“I don’t want to translate this,” said Mikoto.

“Please. We won’t get anywhere otherwise.”

Kamijou frantically pleaded against the sudden threat of a boycott and Mikoto finally got back to her job.

“Understood. I will pay back my debts with this,” said Cendrillon using Mikoto’s mouth. “What do I need to do?”

It seemed Cendrillon had snuck into Academy City by hiding inside a package. She had been in the form of cooking ingredients, so she had sent the cardboard box to someone who frequently ordered such things.

It had taken some doing to acquire that data, but it seemed Cendrillon had managed to gather data from a company outside of Academy City.

Kamijou Touma wanted her to use the leftover ingredients for something and had asked her to retrieve them, but she suddenly realized something as she ran down the road.

“…Where was that apartment?”

She had been taken to the apartment while packed inside a cardboard box, so she had no idea what path she had taken on the way there. And when she had left, she was being chased out by one of Academy City’s espers who had ridiculous destructive power, so she had not had time to remember what route she took.

That meant she had to start by searching for someone that knew the way to the apartment in which she had left the leftover ingredients.

Meanwhile, Hamazura Shiage and Takitsubo Rikou walked along next to the multilevel overpass. They had ended up there thanks to a casual comment from Mugino Shizuri when the girl had met up with the two of them.

“By the way, what happened to the security buzzer you gave to Fremea? Didn’t it have GPS tracking?”

“Ah.”

“Ah.”

An ominous creaking noise came from Mugino’s high-tech fake hand when the Hamazura-Takitsubo couple (who could both be rather stupid at times) let out that sound of realization.

“Oh? So you forgot, did you? So all this time I’ve been killing my legs walking around and around and around and around was for nothing? Haaamazuraaa…”

“Wait, wait, I’ll check it now!! I’ll check the GPS, so spare me that steel fist! You’d probably knock my jaw off!!”

And once they headed after the security buzzer’s GPS signal, they found themselves at that multilevel overpass.

However…

“She’s not here.”

“The only person here is that strange woman that tackled me?”’

The security buzzer’s GPS signal pointed to that tall, pale woman, so they had to seriously think about the possibility that someone had stolen Fremea’s possession. And it also looked like some kind of fight was about to break out.

But then someone completely unexpected interfered.

A young girl began speaking in French.

“Oh, there you are, you asshole. You need to show me the way back to that apartment.”

“This is just a failing in my knowledge of French and you didn’t just say what I think you did…right?”

A dangerous creaking noise came from Mugino as if the special makeup on her face was having trouble withstanding the movements of her muscles.

Hamazura looked confused and asked, “Do you know her? …Actually, she looks kinda familiar. Is she someone’s little sister or something?”

Cendrillon ignored them and continued in French, “I left some of my ingredients in your apartment. I need them to resolve a large problem in this city.”

“Tch… So was I attacked last night by someone dressed like Frenda because of that? Were they trying to prevent that issue from being resolved for someone’s benefit?” spat out Mugino. But, “I don’t have time for that.” With a truly annoyed look, she grabbed the back of Hamazura’s neck and held him out towards the small Cendrillon. “Do you want to be turned to ash or do you want to get this stupid-looking boy to show you the way? It’s your choice.”

“Hey, wait!! What about Fremea!?”

As Hamazura flailed his arms and legs around in midair, they heard yet another voice.

It belonged to…

“I just called them,” said Yoshikawa Kikyou as she lightly waved a hand holding a cell phone. “Our girl and your…what was that blonde girl’s name? Well, they’re together. …They also said something about being with a rhinoceros beetle, so parts of the situation are a bit unclear. But they at least seem to be safe for the moment.”

“What?” Mugino gave Yoshikawa a horribly displeased look as she tossed Hamazura towards Cendrillon with a single hand. “And why are you telling us that?”

“Perhaps it was unfair of me to give you my information before telling you I want something in return.”

Yoshikawa’s expression did not change.

Takitsubo Rikou sensed the scent of a researcher in the way she seemed used to handling espers who had great power and an abnormal mental structure.

“Academy City’s #2 Level 5, Kakine Teitoku, is working to kill our girl. And if he succeeds, the odds are good your girl will be killed as well. So help me.”

“He’s after your brat, right? It doesn’t matter to us as long as we take Fremea away from her.”

“For you maybe. But what about…Fremea, was it? I doubt she would be happy about it.”

“…”

“No, no, no, no!! Mugino! Don’t look like she’s taking Fremea hostage! This is completely normal. If Fremea’s friend is about to be killed, there’s nothing wrong with fighting to save her!” shouted Hamazura.

“You have an odd idea of ‘normal’,” said Mugino in displeasure after giving a kick to Hamazura who she had already handed over to Cendrillon.

Mugino then asked for the necessary information in annoyance.

“So where is the #2?”

“In the underground passageways at the bottom level of the multilevel overpass.”

“How do you know that?”

“If you knew…well, I’m sure it would start a fight. But try to keep this in an area where Level 5s fighting will not affect anyone else. I also have to deal with the issue of Last Order being eaten.”

While keeping all but what she needed for the negotiations a secret, Yoshikawa gave a slight smile and thought to herself.

(I do not hesitate to get students involved in actual battles just because they are strong. I may be naïve but I really am not kind.)

Suddenly, the mysterious French-speaking girl spoke up.

“I do not know who is protecting who, but you will need my help to keep that girl from being eaten.”

“…Is my French rusty or something? Eaten…you say?”

“Don’t worry. That is what I heard too.”

Yoshikawa and Mugino exchanged a glance and Cendrillon continued speaking.

“Also, if you intend on protecting that girl’s friend, it seems you must also protect that Fräulein Kreutune woman who is being manipulated by her desire to eat the girl. …To be honest, it doesn’t matter to me. But that’s what Kamijou Touma said, so I have no choice.”

Hamazura thought briefly upon hearing Mugino’s lazy translation.

The fact that the name Kamijou Touma had been mentioned meant that same softhearted mood that pulled others into an effort he had seen at Hawaii was at the core of this. But setting that aside…

The security buzzer had ended up with that white woman.

But what if it had not been forcibly taken?

To keep Fremea from being sad, they had to save her friend Last Order. What if the same reasoning applied to that white woman?

“Hamazura.”

“…Takitsubo, can I be completely honest? This is a pain in the ass.” Hamazura brought a hand to his forehead, but he did not stop there. “But it means we can’t overlook this.”

After having Cendrillon (who had apparently heard it from someone else) quickly explain the situation regarding Fräulein Kreutune, an obvious question floated up in Hamazura, Takitsubo, Mugino, and Yoshikawa’s minds.

Namely…

“How…how are we supposed to stop this Fräulein Kreutune person?”

“It is simple,” said Cendrillon easily as she pointed at her own chest with her thumb. “She will eat a specific person’s brain. And I left the materials needed to use that against her in your apartment.”

As a result, Hamazura and Takitsubo led Cendrillon to their apartment, Mugino headed to the multilevel overpass to destroy Academy City’s #2, and Yoshikawa Kikyou…

“I can’t actually fight, so I’m left with nothing to do. The data analysis I can carry out is only any good for things inside test tubes.”

She ended up coming with Hamazura and the others to act as a French translator for Cendrillon.

And…

They found Kinuhata Saiai cleaning up the apartment she shared with Hamazura and the others.

“I’m the only one!! I’m the only one doing any super work! Even if I handed off the dark side investigation to Mugino, super what am I doing in the middle of this once-a-year school event!?”

“Hey, Kinuhata. Why are you talking to yourself when no one else is around? Is that a habit of yours?”

Kinuhata, who had been shouting out to relieve stress, suddenly froze in place, slowly turned around, and leapt at Hamazura the instant she saw him. She beat him to a pulp with some strange professional wrestling move.

Cendrillon ignored that and headed to the kitchen space.

She pulled out some equipment that had been roughly shoved into a cardboard box.

“Here it is.”

“Can you really make a human body out of this? This is so nonsensical I get the feeling the translator of the Kaitai Shinsho is going to come haunt us.”

Yoshikawa looked at the items lined up on the kitchen counter with a dubious look.

As she poked at Hamazura’s cheek as he lay trembling on the ground, Takitsubo Rikou asked, “What do we need to do?”

Yoshikawa translated the question into French and Cendrillon replied, “Just follow my instructions using the specified amounts. …We just have to knead together the excess brain material into a paste that has a similar structure to the person the monster is targeting.”

“Oh?” said Yoshikawa before translating. “I would be best for that job. I know the structure of her brain quite well.”

While speaking both Japanese and French, she operated her cell phone with her thumb. She was sending an email detailing the plan to those who needed to know. The email to Last Order made it through, but it seemed the one to Accelerator did not as he was in those underground passageways.

“I don’t really get it, but is all of this on Kamijou Touma’s instructions? Did he say feeding this brain to her would stop that woman?” muttered Hamazura as his face paled a fair bit.

Cendrillon replied, “I do not know, but it would be a problem if she was fed too perfect a replica and it emulated the effects of the real brain. This paste is like the negative of a photograph. We will make a second replica based on it but it will be made out of candy. She will be fed the one that is pure candy.”

After packing what they created in a clear bag, Hamazura Shiage headed for the multilevel overpass.

As she walked next to him, Takitsubo said, “Hamazura, do you really think this will work?”

“I have no idea. But I think there’s a chance. It’s a bit of a stretch, but it does make sense.”

The object was too creepy to look at, but it definitely held the possibility of saving Fräulein Kreutune and keeping Fremea from losing a friend.

In other words…

Fräulein Kreutune had a function that meant she had to eat Last Order's brain. It was not an issue of deciding to or not. The impartial string of ones and zeros would make sure she continued to pursue her prey no matter what.

So what if they used that function against her?

What if they fed her a completely useless replica that was exceedingly similar to the brain she used to identify her target?

Fräulein Kreutune would continue carrying out that command until the hole was filled.

But what if they filled the hole with something else?

If her function was satisfied with false information, it would never awaken again.

Fräulein Kreutune would be able to stand before her friends without having to fear anything.

"I may have been stuck behind the scenes without anything important to do," muttered Hamazura under his breath. But he had a small smile on his face. "But getting a shitty role is no reason to slack off!!"

This was the final possibility that Kamijou Touma had reached for at the very, very end.

Many different powers were at work, traveling along the thin connections between people.

It all connected to the final moment.

They all worked for a single, true victory.

Part 19

And…

Time now returns to after the battles.

"Nyah. It's okay now."

"All the scary people are gone, says Misaka as Misaka responds too."

Fräulein Kreutune jumped in surprise when she heard those words.

She looked back down at her own messy hands.

It may have only been an excellent replica.

It may have ended without anyone being sacrificed.

But her expression made it clear she felt she was a loathsome creature for being unable to stop herself from taking the action of eating. And the fact that the person she had been trying to eat had watched her do it seemed to indicate some kind of decisive ruin.

She felt like a criminal in a crime drama after being tricked into revealing information in public that only the criminal could know.

But that was not it.

The situation was completely different.

No one was trying to blame her.

"But…I…I wasn't able to stop…I still…ate…"

"You may be a creature that ecloses upon acquiring a massive amount of information, says Misaka as Misaka gives her estimation. No one can change that and Misaka does not think it is necessarily a good thing to change it, says Misaka as Misaka repeats herself. You may have had a function that made you take the shortest route to eat Misaka's brain and acquire lots of information from the network, says Misaka as Misaka smoothly continues. But…" Last Order did not stop there. "Even if your situation was not taken into account at all and whether you are good or evil was solely determined by your functions, that was only what you were a minute ago, says Misaka as Misaka makes a decisive statement. It does not apply to you now. You do not need to be afraid of anything or worry about whether you are good or evil, says Misaka as Misaka explains. …*You are now nothing but our friend,* says Misaka as Misaka makes her announcement."

Could it really be settled so easily?

Could it truly have such a lovely conclusion?

The method of proving that it could was simple.

"Nyah! I don't get any of this confusing stuff about functions, but we just have to test it out, right!?"

Fremea wrapped one arm around Last Order's shoulders from behind and then the two girls charged towards Fräulein Kreutune's chest.

A soft sound could be heard.

And that was all.

That target, that head, and that brain that had so heavily influenced her actions were right in front of her. And yet she was no longer ruled by that function. Fräulein Kreutune could simply embrace her friends without having to hurt anyone.

She heard a small sound come from within her own body.

Something was writhing within her. Her body was likely reacting to the information beginning to be taken in from the pink imitation. The strange sound continued and she began changing into some unknown new form in increments as small as the differences in a "spot the difference" puzzle.

Not even she knew what would happen.

But that was how it should be.

When humans put in effort, they could not decide in what way that effort would make them grow.

But…

That alone said plenty.

By adding something to her past self, she had gained the right to head in a different direction.

She could move her path far, far away from one that led to biting into someone's head and eating their brain.

"A-ahh…"

She embraced someone for the first time in her life.

Strength slowly but surely entered the arms and fingers wrapped around her friends' backs.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh

were some who were more or less enemies and some that were connected to him by nothing but the thin thread of being a friend of a friend.

But even so…

They would naturally gather in one place to handle someone's crisis and then disappear once it was resolved.

They would head back to their individual paths and return to their proper place.

Chapter 8: The Simplest Structure in the World. *One_on_One.*

Part 1

"Hey," called out the Lightning God Thor.

He was in the portion of Academy City's District 11 that functioned as a shipping distribution base for land routes. Evening had already fallen and the mountains of large containers piled up here and there were tinted orange.

"Sorry about asking you to see me off."

He was speaking to Kamijou Touma. That boy had fought a fierce battle against Leivinia Birdway after being shot in the side, so he really should have been heading back to his hospital bed as quickly as possible. But that boy had a reason to continue on even after the primary problem had been resolved.

Namely…

"If I don't make sure that you all have left the city, I won't be able to sleep."

"Ha ha. I guess not." Thor laughed lightly. "Marian Slingeneyer and Mjölnir have already left. At times like this, it's the job of the one with direct combat ability to stay behind as a rear guard. That lets me take this slight detour."

"Is this the place you use to get in and out?"

"When you get down to it, the fundamentals are important. It's easier to slip by in the area with the most stuff going in and out. We could of course buy a first class ticket for the airport in District 23 and enjoy a comfortable flight, but the risk is too high if we get caught." He shrugged. "Plus, this district is trying to optimize and speed up the shipping distribution process, so everything is automated except for a few engineers. Apparently, the drivers coming in from outside Academy City just have to attach a rented device to the trucks electronics and the trucks will be automatically unloaded while they sip on coffee and read the newspaper at the rest area at the edge of the district. And the same goes for the drivers from within Academy City. And that system means there are no human eyes to see us here. That makes it perfect for the occult to sneak in."

It was a city surrounded by a wall in a country surrounded by ocean.

That alone would have made it one of the most difficult places to infiltrate in the world. But Gremlin had crossed so many national borders and walked through so many parts of the world that they could do it with ease.

That may have been an amazing skill.

But it only meant they were completely cut off from ever being truly at rest.

“We will leave Fräulein Kreutune in Academy City. She ate something weird and then something about her was distorted. I don’t know if you call it her physical makeup, her conditions, or her attributes, but you get the picture. She no longer has any value to Gremlin. But I wonder what Academy City thinks. I suppose she is no longer an impediment to them now that there is no danger of her eclosing. They likely have no more reason to capture her and lock her up.”

“What if they try anyways?”

“We did some damage to the windowless building, but it was Fräulein Kreutune herself who destroyed that wall. And she has now become curious about the outside world. Even if they try to shut her away, she will escape to chase after the curiosity that wells up within her. Failing to capture her and causing frequent incidents that draw attention is not what they want. My guess is she will be free to stay with…what were their names? Oh, right. Last Order and Fremea. And most importantly,” said Thor. “I would say that was an ending much more suited to be called ‘saving her’ than if we had forcibly dragged her away to the other side of the world.”

“I see.”

Kamijou let out a slow breath.

And then he asked a question.

“Are you sure this is what you wanted? Completing that spear is what the Magic God Othinus wants most of all, right? There is no guarantee the details of what happened here will remain a secret forever. And even if they do, I have no idea what Othinus will do now that her plan has gone awry.”

“I can manage,” said Thor simply.

He did not hesitate despite knowing it was something that could never be resolved simply.

He gave a smile and changed the subject.

“Now then. The problem related to Fräulein Kreutune has been mostly resolved. The monsters of Gremlin and Ollerus’s group have left. Academy City’s dark side has…well, I honestly don’t really know. But as I said before, I doubt they will do anything to cause more of a commotion. We have

managed to take care of all of the problems that had stacked up like some kind of puzzle game."

"Thor? What are you-…?"

"I'm saying…"

He grinned.

The Lightning God Thor gave a smile larger than any he had shown before.

"It's about time we got down to the real issue, Kamijou Touma."

An explosive noise rang out.

Arc fusion blades energetically shot out from the five fingers on Thor's right hand.

"Thor! What are you doing!?"

"Don't act surprised. Remember what I said? The situation around you is pathetic. Everyone leads you around like a trained monkey so they can use your right hand for their own purposes. …And from the beginning, I said I would betray you. I want to fight you for my own reasons. This has nothing to do with Gremlin!!"

Kamijou thought his comprehension of language was beginning to fail.

But it was not.

One of his basic assumptions had been wrong.

Thor had not been risking his life in those fights in order to resolve the problems. He had been trying to resolve those troublesome and annoying problems to gain the benefits of risking his life in those battles.

Kamijou finally understood that.

But he shook his head.

"I have no reason to fight you. We couldn't have saved Fräulein Kreutune without you! If anything, I owe you. So why does it have to come to this!?"

"You're thinking about this wrong, *Kamijou-chan*. Anger and hate are not the only reasons to fight. It is not only the bad guys who clench their fists and go in for the punch. You should know that better than anyone, so you can't stop me from doing this. But most importantly, I'm all fired up. My engine has been running full-throttle ever since I first heard about you."

Thor smiled as he swung his arm to point at Kamijou with the tip of one of the arc fusion blades.

He did nothing but smile.

“When two ridiculously huge powers collide, damage will spread to the surrounding area. My fights can be described using horrible words like ‘war’. But Kamijou-chan, what about that power of yours? You’re just a high school student and yet you’ve saved quite a few people! You even ended World War III!! You’ve survived this far fighting Gremlin!! And the wonderful power that did all that is the ability to negate!? Oh, I can’t wait. My next stage of growth is finally, finally coming into view!! I can have a battle amidst such stinging tension that I have no idea who will win…*and as a conflict between a ridiculously huge power and a negating power, it won’t even cause that much damage!!* Has there ever been a more convenient or profitable battle than this, Kamijou-chan!?”

Was that why?

Was that why Thor had gotten so mad in that fast food restaurant and started to punch Kamijou?

Had he snapped because the opponent he had been looking forward to facing for so long had disappointed him in not even being able to immediately decide to save a damsel in distress?

My enemy…

certainly has become pathetic.

“To be honest, I was pretty disappointed when I first saw you. If you hadn’t made such a wonderful comeback at the last second, I might have turned you to ash along with the hamburgers. But you have an excellent look in your eyes now. You’ve regained that look. That is the look my enemy needs. The kind of fight that is satisfying no matter who wins is finally looking like a real possibility. I need a fight like that to get what I want.”

“Why…?” asked Kamijou in a scratchy voice. And then his voice grew to a shout. “You were legitimately mad about the circumstances Fräulein Kreutune was in, right!? You did what you did because you really did want to free her form her pain and suffering, right!? So why are you talking about working to benefit yourself? Why are you trying to start an unnecessary fight!?”

“I’m not the kind of wonderful person you seem to think I am. I am a member of Gremlin, remember?” Despite seeming to mock himself, Thor did not hesitate to answer. “Basically, I want power. There is a limit to what you can obtain training on your own, but you start to find the opponents available to you growing very limited once you reach a certain level. …I can think of a few people who are stronger than me, but fighting them could easily end up destroying an entire city or an entire country. That would

leave a bad taste in my mouth. It's been hard finding a way to meet the requirements for the next step."

"…"

"Do I want power so I can save someone or do I want to save someone so I can gain power? That has gotten so jumbled up inside me that not even I know the answer, but that is the essence of what I am. I keep repeating the cycle to gain more and more power, and I reach my hand out to save whoever needs saving during the process. …I have no simple power from some special source, but I continue to reach my hand out and that ultimately builds up more power within me. In that way, I am quite a bit different from you."

But was that exactly why?

Had he decided someone similar yet fundamentally different would make the optimum opponent?

"Tho-…"

Kamijou started to call out to the boy, but he trailed off.

His body wavered.

Pain once more exploded from the wound on his side he had almost forgotten was there.

"…Oh, that's right, that's right. I had thought you could resolve this in top form, so you get some points taken off there. To be blunt, it's inelegant and it's an obstruction. It'll lower the number of experience points I get for this battle, so I can't just ignore it."

The possibility that the fight could be put off flashed through Kamijou's mind.

It could possibly be put off at least until his gunshot wound healed.

But that was not the case.

Thor used the hand not producing arc fusion blades to casually reach around behind him. He pulled out something that had been tucked into the belt of his pants.

The object felt more like plastic than metal.

It was a tool meant to kill.

It was a handgun.

“I swiped this from one of the engineers at customs. I don’t really know much about guns, but this is the same caliber, right?”

“You can’t mean… Wait, Thor!! Don’t…!!”

Kamijou frantically tried to grab the gun away from him, but he was too far away.

Before Kamijou reached the other boy, Thor pressed the gun’s barrel against his own side and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

A dry gunshot burst out.

A spot of dark red liquid appeared on his upper body and the stain slowly spread across his clothes. Thor staggered, but he did not collapse. He no longer needed the gun, so he tossed it aside and looked back at Kamijou.

He appeared to be enjoying himself.

He was smiling.

“O-ohh…ohh… Amazing. I avoided hitting anything important, but the core of my body is still shaking like crazy. Well done running to the battlefield in this state. I’m glad to see all the more how extraordinary you are.”

“Thor…You idiot!!”

This was hardly leveling the playing field.

Kamijou had been shot in the side too, but he had received surgery at the hospital and received first aid from Cendrillon to stop the bleeding. The wound could reopen at any time, but he was still in a better position than Thor who had only just been shot.

But Thor did not seem to care.

Kamijou had no idea how this “growth” Thor had mentioned worked, but he seemed perfectly willing to risk his own life to obtain those experience points.

“Okay, Kamijou-chan. Don’t try any kind of boring excuses like ‘I refuse to fight so I will not clench my fist’ or ‘come and punch me until you are satisfied’.”

Thor shot arc fusion blades out of his left hand as well.

He spread the ten beams of light out like wings.

“If you need a reason, then use my wound. If I am not treated soon, I will die. You have no choice but to fight me seriously even if it brings tears to your eyes!!”

The final battle began with the Lightning God Thor who was in charge of direct combat within Gremlin.

Or…

Perhaps he had been unable to become anything except the one in charge of direct combat because he could only face the world in this way.

Part 2

District 11 was located on the eastern edge of Academy City and it functioned as a shipping distribution base for land routes. Kamijou and Thor were in a place where the long and narrow containers for large trailers were piled up. Normally, those containers would be checked for legality and safety at customs and then repacked into midsized and small containers to be transported through the streets of Academy City.

They had turned one portion of that area into a battlefield.

Unlike other parts of the city, there was no risk to unrelated people’s lives, so Thor did not restrain himself from shouting out loud.

“Ha ha! Mjölnir! Perform final connection check! Once it is done, begin supply!!”

An explosive noise burst out.

The arc fusion blades extending from his ten fingers suddenly extended to over 20 meters long. That was enough to cause the air to expand and send out great gusts of wind.

Thor casually swung his right arm horizontally.

He sliced through the containers piled up to the side like they were paper scraps and they came crashing down towards Kamijou.

But…

He had no time to worry about those countless containers that collapsed as if filling a valley once their foundation was gone.

(Shit!!)

Kamijou silently cursed, held the wound on his side that was beginning to hurt, and did his best to clench his right fist. The five arc fusion blades moving with Thor's right hand had already almost reached him. He did not know if he could fully negate those reinforced arc fusion blades. He might not be burned even if he couldn't, but the overwhelming speed at which they moved could easily knock his fist back hard enough to dislocate his shoulder.

(Then I need to eva-…!!)

He did not even have time to think.

When Kamijou tried to crouch down and duck under the blades, Thor swung his left arm down diagonally. This cut through the containers even further and the 10 fusion blades approached even closer both horizontally and vertically.

Which meant…

"Ooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhh

It was the Lightning God Thor.

Without bothering to stop the momentum of being repelled by Kamijou's right hand, he had expanded the air with his arc fusion blades to move his own body. He had forcefully leapt up over Kamijou's head and clung to the bottom of one of the containers falling like an avalanche.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

If Kamijou tried to stop those arc fusion blades approaching from above at such great speed, his movements would be sealed. The next attack would slice him in two.

He practically threw himself to the ground in a frantic attempt to evade.

Those ten fingers were like a folding fan with no paper attached. The arc fusion blades spreading out from his wrist in a fan shape sliced into the ground.

It was practically a miracle Kamijou managed to slip through a gap between them.

A part of him wondered if Thor had intentionally let him escape because he did not want the battle to end so easily.

Standing up would have taken too long, so Kamijou rolled away from Thor and frantically tried to think.

(What do I do? If I fight a defensive battle, I'll just end up cornered. Without something that lets me get my fist in attack range, I'll just be gradually worn down!!)

A hot pain was spreading from his right wrist. He had no idea how many more times he could stop Thor's attacks. He would not be surprised if he heard a cracking sound and the bone broke or the joint dislocated.

"What's wrong, Kamijou-chan?" With a thin, thin smile on his face, Thor held up the arc fusion blades coming from his hands. "Was Fiamma of the Right really only this strong? Was Carissa and the Curtana Original? I don't like overestimating people, but surely they were much stronger than this."

"…"

Kamijou started to say something.

But then he heard a dry cracking sound.

It was an odd noise like cracks entering a thin plastic board and it was coming from Thor. After the sound happened two or three times at irregular intervals, Kamijou finally realized what it was.

"Wait…Don't tell me…!!"

"What? Is it that strange to hear someone cracking their joints? Being able to crack your knuckles or your neck isn't really something to be proud of in my opinion."

"Can your body not keep up with the burden of your movements…no, with the output of those blades!? If so…!!"

“C’mon now. Thor-san is not some special-made person with any ridiculous power like the power of a Saint or the power to save the world. And unlike Othinus, I’m not a Magic God. Just to be clear, I’m just a magician. And yet I am trying to reach the same level as those worldwide top rankers. I have to push myself a bit too hard somewhere along the line.”

By adding boosters to his arms and legs, he could jump up to the top of a pile of containers in a single bound.

Most of it was probably waving them around without being able to properly control it, but it was theoretically possible if he could properly control the thrust vectors.

But…

It would only be the ends of his arms and legs receiving that powerful thrust. If he finely controlled that tremendous power and quickly moved at acute angles, it would have a horrible effect on his shoulders and the joints of his thighs. Also, making that jump from a stationary position would surely bring out cries of pain from all the blood vessels and organs in his body.

He did not have some ridiculous means of solving that such as having a naturally extra sturdy body.

Nor did he break his way through that problem with a trick such as using some kind of spiritual item or wearing an anti-G suit.

And even if he did…

That would not completely ensure his safety. In fact, that could be seen as ignoring the disadvantages and risks and focusing on the advantages.

“The pain? Don’t worry about that, Kamijou-chan. When I’m enjoying myself, none of that matters.”

“Why are you going this far…!?”

“Because I can reach it.”

He tilted his head which made an odd noise in either the joint or the cartilage.

He seemed confused why Kamijou would even ask that question.

“If something is too far away to ever reach, you just give up. But that was not the case for me. By stacking everything up, I made it close enough to grasp the stars in the night sky. It is a bit dangerous, but it’s as easy as climbing up on the table and standing up on my tiptoes. Then I can reach

the cupboard. There's no need to call in my parents to get it for me. And so…" continued Thor.

He stretched his arms out horizontally to the left and right.

"Times ten."

An ominous noise came from the arc fusion blades.

"I can reach even further. Times ten again."

The change that occurred in that area filled with piled-up containers was too large for Kamijou to grasp with the naked eye. The arc fusion blades extending left and right from Thor's ten fingers stretched to about 2 kilometers in length.

"Do you understand now, Kamijou Touma? This is who I am. A personal fight of mine can reach the level of a war. I have made it this far. And that is a wonderful thing. But this is not my goal. Because now I can see the area beyond what I thought was the goal and thought I could never reach."

He held the power to completely destroy an entire district with a swing of his arm.

He personified war with his personal power.

He was in charge of direct combat.

While clearly showing off his increased power, Thor broke into the core of the issue.

He saw through the slight movement in Kamijou's gaze.

"*…You stretch out your arm too.* It may be tough, but if you climb up on the table and stand on your tiptoes, your fingertips will be able to reach it. It's worth at least trying, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The handgun," said Thor simply. "The one I shot myself with is lying nearby. I'm sure the idea flashed through your mind. My blades are too long. Your fist's range is too short. After all, this is 2 kilometers…2000 meters. You want something that lets you ignore distance. And you know for a fact my body is not all that sturdy. If you shoot a bullet into me, it will make a hole. I proved that myself."

"…"

"But another thought entered your mind, too. A handgun is a very certain weapon. Too certain. You might be able to win if you use it, but you might

accidentally kill me. …You are right to hesitate, but you are also missing something. Have you forgotten that I am a member of Gremlin?"

The air grew cold.

The same thing that had hung in the air of Baggage City briefly tickled at Kamijou's nose ominously.

"We can no longer use Fräulein Kreutune. That final piece of the spear is no longer there to draw Othinus's focus. You have no idea what that Magic God will do without an objective. And if she makes her move, it will all be over. Hawaii and Baggage City were horrible, but that was still controlled destruction. But what about next time? Will she start indiscriminate attacks wherever she can reach? Or will she use the FCE data to target some of your friends?"

"…Thor."

"I am the final key. Do you not like that fact?" said Thor with a thin, thin smile. He prepared a new reason to fight. "I am the final key to find Gremlin's headquarters. I am the final key to solve this without any more sacrifices. …So what will you do? Is it your idea of justice to let me escape due to your personal circumstances and morals?"

"Thoooooo

On the other hand, Thor's arc fusion blades were 2 kilometers long. A single swing could slice Kamijou's body in two. They were both a single action away from ending the battle.

But…

If you knew how the other would act, it was not difficult to take the initiative.

(Too bad.)

Thor had no reason to hesitate.

District 11 was almost fully automated to optimize and speed up the shipping distribution work done there. He had already knocked out the engineers in customs, so he could *cut through the entire district horizontally* without causing any human damage as long as he was conscious of where the rest area for drivers was on the edge of the district. That was why Thor had ultimately chosen this area.

It was a stage for pure combat that he could only use once.

He had not wanted to waste that perfect stage on the preliminary work of fighting Ollerus's group and Gremlin.

And that was why he felt slightly disappointed in the outcome.

Thor swung his arc fusion blades down not at Kamijou but at the midpoint between Kamijou and the handgun. He swung those beams of light down mercilessly as they sliced through piles of containers and distant cranes.

(So you head towards the simple source of power in the end. I had hoped you might be able to come to a different conclusion than me.)

If that had happened, surely some other conclusion would have been reached.

If Kamijou headed straight for the handgun, he would be sliced apart by the arc fusion blades. Even if he stayed put, he would not last long. He would be finished in the next attack.

He had the power to negate.

That was something different from the power to create destruction.

(I had hoped you could show me something different than what led me to Gremlin!!)

The conclusion was just about to be reached.

It was the simple yet boring conclusion of the one using more powerful and greater violence surviving.

But just before it did…

A high-pitched noise rang out.

It was the sound of Thor's arc fusion blades being repelled by Kamijou's right fist.

"What…?"

If Kamijou had leapt for the handgun and stretched out his right hand to reach it, he could never have repelled the blades.

But those massive arc fusion blades had indeed sliced through not just the nearby containers but the entire district.

Which meant…

The choice Kamijou Touma had ultimately made was…

"You don't mean…!!"

In his surprise, Thor moved almost by reflex. He ignored the right hand that had been repelled and attacked with the arc fusion blades extending from the five fingers on his left hand. They sliced through automatically controlled trucks and forklifts as they moved horizontally towards Kamijou's upper body.

But…

Once again…

With a high-pitched noise, the swing of a fist forcibly altered the trajectory of Thor's arc fusion blades.

Each time Kamijou did so, a tremendous burden had to be put on his right wrist.

"You gave up on the handgun!? But you'll only be worn down if you continue on the defensive!!"

"…Is that really the case?"

Kamijou gave a peaceful smile as he held back up his creaking right hand.

This time, he truly was smiling.

"Those arc fusion blades follow the movement of your fingers. But is that only a one-way thing? Even in my desperate struggles to block them, I saw what happened. *I saw your arm get repelled just like the arc fusion blades did.*"

"Damn you…"

“Those blades can slice through anything. They weren’t made to catch on anything. What you’re doing is like taking a metal baseball bat and swinging it at a concrete wall at speeds you can’t control. Receiving these ridiculous attacks is wearing down my wrist, but the same goes for you! Your wrists are at their limits too, aren’t they!?”

His 2000 meter reach held no meaning in this fight.

Both Kamijou and Thor were injured when the attacks were repelled.

In that case…

“Before, you asked me if I really had no reason to pick up the handgun,” said Kamijou as if spitting out the words. “I’ll give you my answer. No, I have no reason. I’m not perfect. Even without a grand reason, I will think about reaching over to pick up a nearby gun if I’m in danger. But that isn’t the case here. Whatever your reasons may have been, you risked your life to save Fräulein Kreutune! There has to be a way to resolve this without anyone killing anyone!!”

“…I see.”

Thor smiled.

He had been smiling ever since the fight began, but this one was somehow different.

“Interesting. You really are interesting. Even if you stand in a position from which you can reach the stars in the night sky, you would show us some different answer. You would follow a different path than the one that led me to Gremlin.”

“Thor?”

“That’s right!! My enemy has to be at least on this level!!”

There was no signal.

Thor casually swung his arc fusion blades toward Kamijou, slicing through the much too vague concept of the “scenery” as he did so. Rather than simply trying to defend, Kamijou kept in mind what would cause the most damage to Thor’s wrist as he used his fist to knock those blades to the side. The blades struck each other and lost a bit of their momentum. Kamijou used that as an opportunity to move forward a bit and slam his right hand into them once more.

An ominous creaking sound came from within Kamijou’s body.

The same had to be coming from Thor’s body as well.

“!!”

Even if things were controlled by subtle tricks on the surface and even if it appeared they were pushing the momentum back and forth with skill and cleverness, it was something else that would decide whether Kamijou or Thor won. As the pain was amplified with each consecutive strike, who would reach their limit first? Whose wrist would give out first? That was what it came down to. Even if one of them had an overwhelming advantage in everything else, they would lose it all if that one point was overturned. That was the essence of this fight.

After 5 or 10 strikes, a truly strange noise came from Kamijou's right hand.

He did not make it to 20 strikes.

With a decisive cracking noise, all strength suddenly left the five fingers of that hand. The commands he was sending from his head were not reaching the hand, and it simply hung loosely down, ignoring its skeletal structure.

The joint had been dislocated.

"Ha ha."

Thor's laughter reverberated throughout the area.

In response to the change in Kamijou's right wrist, his attacks ended.

"Ha ha ha ha. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha."

The battle was over.

The Imagine Breaker power residing in Kamijou Touma's right hand would likely still function whether the joint was dislocated or not. But if he received such tremendous impacts on the hand with the joint dislocated, the flesh would be crushed around the wrist and the hand might even eventually come off altogether.

And that was simply from an anatomical point of view. Receiving an impact to that dislocated wrist would also send intense pain running through it. He could easily pass out if he felt that pain repeatedly.

But…

"…You got me," said Thor.

"Yeah."

"Damn, and I really thought this would be checkmate. I guess I really can't see anything else when I have that carrot hanging down before my eyes. But I guess that's just the kind of spell it is."

Thor shrugged and spread his hands out like wings.

Those wings were broken.

Or more accurately, Thor's wrists were.

Thor's colorful arc fusion blades flickered a few times like a neon tube reaching its lifespan, and then they disappeared as if dissolving into the air.

Kamijou had no idea where Thor's limit was. It was possible he could emit arc fusion blades from his feet as well.

And so he asked.

"What will you do now?"

"Continue this of course."

"I thought so."

With his dislocated right hand still hanging down, Kamijou took a step towards Thor. He slowly but surely walked forward.

"We need to finish this."

Finally, his walk turned into a run.

And his run turned into a dash.

That spiky-haired boy was not throwing himself into that fight because he had Imagine Breaker. Even if he could not use his right hand, he still had his left hand, right leg, and left leg. So he could still fight. He would end this ridiculous fight Thor had prepared so that Thor's gunshot wound could be treated. For that reason, Kamijou charged towards the magician.

"…Sorry, Kamijou-chan."

Suddenly, Thor began muttering something.

But Kamijou had already made it right up to Thor. He was at such close range that any attack would hit.

And so…

"*Thor is more than a mere lightning god.*"

It was too late.

A dull sound rang out.

Kamijou's body flew through the air and slammed forcefully into the ground.

Part 4

His mind was hazy. The scenery in his vaguely shaking vision was covered in the orange of evening. It took quite a long time for Kamijou to realize he was collapsed on his back.

“Thor is…”

He heard a voice coming from somewhere.

The voice was coming from somewhere outside the range of Kamijou’s vision.

“…currently known as the #2 in Norse mythology and as the war god that rules over thunder and lightning. But a different view can be seen in the earliest legends. I guess you could say he was involved in agriculture and refining metals. He was the god that helped with the production and manufacturing that supported the culture.”

What had happened to Kamijou?

What had he been hit with in that final moment?

Kamijou desperately tried to gather information, but it did not go well. His head had been completely shaken, so he was unable to even grasp the supporting pillar needed at the base of thoughts.

“But things change based on people’s circumstances. Ruling is a lot easier when the god at the very top is a war god that protects the military rather than a god that protects farmers and manufacturers. Being known as the most distinguished god holds a lot of meaning. So at that point, Thor became a lightning god. Originally, he was in control of all forms of weather, the seasons, and natural disasters, but he became a god who can only boast of his cheap destructive power.”

Only Thor’s words continued.

“Do you understand, Kamijou Touma?”

His words continued calmly.

“To befit the original meaning of the name, I headed down a certain path. If that girl hadn’t taken such ridiculous measures to gain knowledge *even if she had to pull out one of her eyes and hang herself*, I could have stood at the top of Gremlin.”

Kamijou could not gather his thoughts.

He could not come to any conclusion.

Thor spoke softly to him.

“You defeated Thor as a lightning god…but that was as far as you got. You could not reach the level of the Almighty Thor.”

He had lost.

He had been defeated.

After hearing the words from someone else’s mouth, Kamijou finally grasped the situation he was in.

Even with both his wrists broken and his arc fusion blades unusable, that monster had easily defeated Kamijou. And now he spoke with a light tone.

“But don’t worry too much about what’s to come. I may have made it sound like no one knows what the Magic God Othinus will do with her route to completing the spear destroyed, but it isn’t like I don’t have a guess. Since I’ve won, I’ll take responsibility for winning. …To be honest, you try too hard. You’re protecting the world too much all on your own. Take this chance to get some rest and let yourself relax.”

Kamijou’s hazy vision turned toward something.

He could not find the boy anywhere in the orange-tinted scene.

“Thor…?” he muttered, but no one responded.

The boy had disappeared at some point.

At that point, Kamijou Touma’s consciousness cut out.

Epilogue: Let the Next Fight Begin. *Next_Batter_Circle.*

An event did not necessarily have only one conclusion.

It had as many conclusions as there were people involved in the event.

Here, a few of those will be introduced.

"Well that was a complete waste of effort," said Silvia loud enough for the others to hear her.

The Saint was scratching her head after making her way out of the wall surrounding Academy City.

Evening had passed and the darkness of night was spreading. A liveliness illuminated by countless lights, both neon and otherwise, filled the area ahead as if to say this was where Tokyo, the capital of Japan, truly began. However, Silvia and the others were travelling while weaving their way through the gaps of darkness all that light could not fill.

"I was forced into a fight that left a real bad taste in my mouth and we got nothing out of it. We couldn't retrieve Fräulein Kreutune. …And our countermeasures regarding Gremlin change a lot depending on whether we have her or not."

"We couldn't get her, so it's useless thinking about it any longer," replied Leivinia Birdway.

She still looked young yet she had a cold gracefulness to her features. However, all that was ruined by her swollen cheek. It may have been related to the principles she held herself to, but she showed no sign of putting ice on it or treating it in any fashion. That seemed to bring out her displeasure all the more.

"Even if we went back for her, Fräulein Kreutune has already been changed into something other than what the Magic God Othinus wants. We cannot use that to lure her in."

"What? Are you still bothered that you were forced to fight someone on the same side? Results are everything in this world. Even if you cannot accept how it ended and even if it was based on the reasoning of that boy you cannot understand, you cannot complain after you lost."

"…Do you want me to punch you?"

"By the way, young lady. Japan has an interesting theory. Supposedly, those with a real little sister can never imagine an ideal little sister."

"…?"

"So if you reverse that, does it mean little Birdway-chan who has a little sister but not a big brother is the type to imagine an ideal big brother? And now you're upset that you were scolded by the person you thought would listen to everything you had to say and that you could always rely on when you were in trouble? But he still tried to talk things out with you even after all you did to him. I'd say there's a real connection there."

"I hope you're prepared because I'm about to introduce you to this full set of the major arcana."

"I noticed you never used that. The four elements of the symbolic weapon are related to the minor arcana of tarot. If you had used the 22 cards of the major arcana to bring out a combo going from the Fool to the World, you could have temporarily boosted your parameters and made supersonic movements," said Silvia with a huge grin.

"More importantly." Brunhild Eiktobel's tone was completely serious despite rudely interrupting. "Where is Ollerus? You said before that he was preparing."

"Oh, that. He is dealing with our true purpose here…the one that has nothing to do with Fräulein Kreutune," replied Silvia as she cracked her neck. "*He said his preparations are complete.*"

Despite being so neatly maintained, Academy City had plenty of scary rumors.

The black garbage truck that would take away bad children that did not do what their teacher said. Specimen #502 that was the source of strange groans heard coming from within manholes but should never be investigated. A forbidden name that's owner would kill anyone who entered the name into a search engine. The human bone colored tiles that were said to increase in number around Academy City's roads after people inconvenient to the city disappeared. And the urban legend among urban legends that said the many rumors were given set rules and controlled by the AIM diffusion fields throughout the city and that they were a means of manipulating information.

There were so many scary rumors that children did not know what to do if they really did happen across one of the mysterious people featured in them on their way home from school.

The children doubted they would be able to escape just by running away as quickly as they could.

But they did not need to worry.

The weaknesses of the mysterious people featured in urban legends were constantly being looked into.

For example, if a rumor was spreading that said no one could escape from a certain woman who could run 100 meters in 3 seconds, a different rumor would be created saying one would be safe as long as one had some hard candy or pomade.

Of course, the rumors would change on a daily basis, so new theories would crop up saying such weaknesses did not work at all.

For example, a rumor could spread saying the hard candy and pomade only worked on the original woman, but they were completely ineffectual against the second one whose mouth had been split open by the original woman.

Legends spreading fear and legends defeating that fear would constantly spread while trying to outdo each other, and it seemed it would never reach any conclusion.

But there was one new rumor.

It was a very simple rumor, so it may have held the possibility of spreading explosively among the children of Academy City.

It was as follows:

All sorts of scary rumors spread through this city, but if you run across one of the scary people spoken of in those rumors, you just need to shout out as loudly as you can.

Shout out, "Help me, rhinoceros beetle!"

If you do that, you will be all right.

Academy City's #2 Level 5 who uses Dark Matter will come.

Someone named Kakine Teitoku will surely come to save you.

Accelerator had returned to the apartment with Yoshikawa Kikyou and Last Order. He was lying in his room with the lights off. It was unclear if

Yoshikawa would speak of what had happened that day with Yomikawa Aiho of Anti-Skill.

Kakine Teitoku the #2 had…actually, it was actually unclear if he should be called that or not. At any rate, the enemy had been defeated.

In the process, Accelerator had found a foothold towards breaking through the difficult issue before him using his own type of methods.

The conclusion had been an excellent one where no one was lost.

However…

(Only the one who was killed can understand the feelings of the one who was killed.)

Those words left to the #1 continued to stab into his heart.

The thorn was small, but it was like a barbed fishing hook and would not be easily removed.

With humans, it seemed a single bad comment left more of an impression than 100 good comments.

"Why the hell have I been acting so spoiled…?"

Had he gotten full of himself just because Last Order, the one who spoke for the whole of the Misaka Network, and Misaka Worst, the aggregation of the network's malice, had forgiven him?

In fact, had they even really forgiven him?

Hadn't he just been letting everything flow in the most convenient and least painful direction for him?

He could not ask forgiveness from those he had killed.

The dead could not feel joy.

After all, the act of killing robbed that of them.

The dead could not feel anger.

After all, the act of killing robbed that of them.

The dead could not feel sorrow.

After all, the act of killing robbed that of them.

The dead could not feel gratitude.

After all, the act of killing robbed that of them.

No matter how he lived his life from here on, it would only be for his own self-satisfaction. He knew that. But there had to be something he could do for himself while he was still alive.

Getting back to the base of it all…

What had been the true intention behind the experiment that had led to the slaughter of over 10,000 Sisters?

At face value, it had been to evolve Academy City's #1 Level 5 to Level 6 which lay beyond that, but he already knew that was not its true purpose. That experiment had either been intended to fail from the beginning or its true purposes were obtained whether it succeeded or failed.

From the information he had gained from his past experiences, the first purpose behind it was likely to scatter almost 10,000 Sisters to the cooperative institutions around the world in order to spread the effects of their AIM diffusion fields.

Since an angel-like being had been created within Academy City by messing with Last Order, the second purpose seemed to be for the Misaka Network to act as a guidance device to control a massive aggregation of AIM diffusion fields.

And there was the term Dragon he had come across in his time working for Academy City's dark side. There was the true monster called Aiwass hidden behind it. Aiwass itself had said the angel-like thing Accelerator had seen in the past had been nothing more than the mold to give Aiwass form. That was the third purpose.

In that case…

What did creating Aiwass accomplish?

That being was indeed a trump card that's power could not be criticized. After all, it had held enough power to instantly defeat Accelerator, Academy City's #1. But there was no record of that tremendous power being used in World War III. Even in the midst of that war in which Academy City's fate hung in the balance, Aiwass had been held in reserve.

In that case, Aiwass had not simply been developed as a weapon.

There had to be some clear objective behind it, but Accelerator could not figure out what it could be.

He knew Aiwass was amazing, but he could not think of any concrete gain obtained from it. Developing new technology was enough of an objective in that city, but if that was the reason, word of Aiwass would have been spread

around the entire world to show off how advanced Academy City's technology was.

A plan to land on the moon using a spaceship did not directly affect most people's lives, but the "information" contained great influence.

Since the development of a being as great as Aiwass had been kept a secret, it had to have a concrete use other than showing it off. And it was likely some objective that held the risk of someone trying to stop it if it was not kept a secret.

Aiwass, the angel-like being, the Misaka Network, Last Order, the Sisters, AIM diffusion fields.

At the very bottom of that pyramid were the completely normal students. Whether they were involved in the dark side of the city or not, the students all emitted those AIM diffusion fields subconsciously. And that led all the way up to Aiwass.

That was the very foundation of Academy City.

Scientific psychic powers.

What if this was not a case of someone taking that existing system and using it for their own purposes?

What if the entire project had been started as an initial step towards reaching Aiwass?

And getting back to the true base of it all…

What exactly were the psychic powers that had been created in Academy City?

Where did this plan begin and what ending did it lead to?

"…"

At this point…

Accelerator finally felt like he had grasped at the edge of some great darkness. It felt like one portion of a giant trap that would swallow up everything. It felt like one portion of a giant maw that was so large that the entire thing was normally impossible to grasp conceptually. It felt like one portion of the true source behind the inescapable pitch black hole that had dragged in the Sisters…those clones humans…those people he had killed.

If Accelerator exposed whatever this was and blamed it, his sins would not conveniently disappear.

But what if…?

What if the people he had killed had cursed that environment with all of their hearts?

What if they had cursed all that had helped him kill more than they had cursed the #1 who had directly done the killing?

What would those people think if they knew the plan that had "progressed wonderfully" with their deaths was even now steadily continuing on to its next step?

Only the one who was killed could understand the feelings of the one who was killed.

Living people readily speaking of how the dead felt could easily lead to twisting those feelings for one's own purposes.

But…

The living could act based on their own feelings for the dead.

Accelerator asked himself what he wanted to do.

If he could do something for those lives that had already been lost, what would he choose?

The #1 would likely go to hell. Setting aside whether that was a simple metaphor or being used in a religious sense, he would certainly not have a decent end. But if there was something he could do before he arrived in that hell, what was it?

"…"

The thorn sticking into him was small, but it would not be removed easily.

That small pain would surely drag him down the path of malice and battle.

It was as if it had been arranged ahead of time.

It was as if it was an intentional code that had been inserted into him by someone. But did Accelerator himself realize that?

This "code" was meant to move him from one path to another.

Accelerator silently sat up in his bed. His gaze wandered. It finally stopped on the room's window. The area beyond was dyed pitch black with the darkness of night. That area beyond was likely the first step towards that other path.

If he headed down it, he would lose everything he had, but he would also gain the chance to acquire things he could not acquire where he was.

With that thought in mind and a serious expression, Accelerator began groping around for his modern cane.

But a knock suddenly came on his door.

Without waiting for a response, the doorknob turned.

A small figure entered.

It should have been the girl known as Last Order.

Anything else would make no sense.

“Hey, Accelerator /return. This is about to get troublesome, so let me interfere /return.”

Something…

Something was wrong.

As he watched that girl stand straight up with her mouth moving open and closed, Accelerator felt a chill run down his spine. It reminded him of when she had been forcibly interfered with using a virus or something in the past.

But this was different.

“Normally, ‘Misaka’ fills the network but leaves the means of external interference to the individual units /return. So don’t expect me to be much of a conversationalist /return. Think of this as being like an email /return. Just so you know, I will simply finish what I am saying even if you ask questions /return.”

This was something from within the Misaka Network.

This was something superior even to Last Order who was the command tower.

No one should have been higher than Last Order on the system.

The #1 began to suspect this was related to the Third Season project Misaka Worst had come from, but then a different possibility came to him. Despite being warned she would give no response, he spoke through clenched teeth.

“Are you the will of the whole of the Misaka Network!?”

This was something created by Academy City yet different from both the angel-like being and Aiwass.

This was something he was unsure could be called human.

Perhaps it should be called the “third existence”.

“Basically, I was thinking you had been in an odd mood ever since that incident was resolved /return.” That girl’s mouth was used to emit someone’s voice as if a recording was being played. “Accelerator, by any chance are you thinking you can approach some kind of good by bringing an

end to this relatively peaceful life and throwing yourself into a fight to approach the secrets of Academy City /escape? Or are you thinking you will only go to hell once everything has been put in order /escape? If so, don't worry about it because you have been led to think those things /return. And doing that won't make you look cool or anything like that /return."

"What the hell are-…"

"You reacted to that with something along the lines of 'What the hell are you saying?', didn't you /escape? Don't do that /return. Let's get rid of all the problems that aren't actually needed, Accelerator /return. Hiding your embarrassment like that is usually quite cute, but /backspace it just gets in the way here /return. So," whoever it was continued, "let me get down to the core of the issue /return. I know what you are probably thinking /return. You think you have abandoned what you need to do by growing so relaxed in this comfortable place /return. …*but* /backspace *that is not the case at all* /return. You're thinking about this backwards /return. You are the #1 monster, so isn't the most comfortable thing for you easy conflict and easy violence followed by easy victory /escape? That's just how it is /return. You were developed to become a monster like that /return. If you head down the path of least resistance where someone wants you to go, you will naturally be stuck running down a path of bloodshed and disaster, won't you /escape?"

"…"

"That is why I said you are thinking about this backwards /return. Accelerator, you are feeling doubts about your own existence right now /return. That is not a bad thing /return. But /backspace *do not let yourself be swept away in the more comfortable direction just because you have been shaken* /return. I am not lending you calculation space so that you can come to that answer /return."

The girl gave a light shrug.

The action looked horribly out of place on her.

"Struggle for someone's sake /return. Struggle in the way that is truly hardest for you /return. …If I wanted to, I could dredge up the memory data for the dead units that still remains on the network and provide definite yes or no answers /return. But /backspace doing that would be a waste, so I won't /return. Let's leave it at the feelings of the dead being only known by the dead /return. And if you take the easy road out and became a monster, I will throw you into a hell several sizes larger than you are imagining /return."

The girl wobbled on her feet.

“And while I may have left Last Order and Misaka Worst with you, I am more interested in making a pass at Kamijou-chan than you /return. That is how I really feel /return. And he seems to be *in a rather dangerous position too* /return. So I would rather you did not make me use my precious ticket here /return.”

And that was it.

The “email” must have come to an end because the small girl’s body collapsed to the side.

A woman in a cheap suit and a lab coat glanced around the area.

She was in the vast underground space in District 3 that had been filled by Academy City’s #2 just the day before. But it was now empty and the pure white Dark Matter he had randomly spread around had cleanly disappeared. With everything unnecessary gone from the space, it had the same loneliness as an empty classroom.

“I just can’t get used to this. No matter how trivial a thing it is, it irritates me for numbers to drop.”

The woman held a long, narrow object about the size of a chewing gum container. It was a digital voice recorder. The woman in the cheap suit and lab coat brought the small microphone up to her lips and continued recording her memos.

“The Dark Matter has cleanly disappeared. This is as expected. Examinations have been requested for the samples taken from the surface at a total of 40 different locations on the floor, walls, and ceiling. But I doubt anything will come of it.”

A small repeated sound like fingernails scratching at something could be heard. The woman pulled a device about the size of a card holder out of her inner pocket. She looked at the screen and found comments including certain common terms were increasing on several message boards and SNSs.

“I have found urban legends relating to the #2. This is too short a time for them to appear naturally. And I doubt Kakine Teitoku – or whatever the current #2 is called – is spreading it himself. It seems someone else from Academy City’s darkness has turned their attention towards the #2. Tag this attention level yellow,” said the woman as she placed the device back in her inner pocket and walked slowly through the vast space. “Details are

unknown regarding the #1. Malice was injected within him, but it is currently unclear if it will bloom into anything. As a personal aside, it would be quite a waste if he remains as he is. After having so much fun with the #2 changing forms like that, the #1 just seems too plain. It would be nice if he could become more grotesque concerning those wings of his."

She then suddenly stopped walking.

"*Takitsubo Rikou's progress as seen in the #2 issue is going exceedingly well.* Tag this one gold," she said as she stood in the center of the vast space and looked straight up. "And of course there is Fremea Seivelun as well. Her Agitate Halation is confirmed to have been used unintentionally. That new possibility of a Level 0 gets a platinum tag. Be extremely careful when gathering data."

At that point, the woman in the cheap suit and lab coat switched off the recorder.

She thought for a bit.

And finally she switched it back on after gathering her thoughts.

"Fräulein Kreutune is out of my jurisdiction. I am rather unhappy about that. …But from what I have observed, she has a durable body that cannot be killed no matter what, a heart that desires friends, and the possibility of being controlled regardless of her personal beliefs. For that reason, she gives me a very similar impression to the aggregation of AIM diffusion fields. It is possible she was used a baseline for Kazakiri Hyouka. If that is the case, there is a single thread connecting Fräulein Kreutune, Kazakiri Hyouka, and Dragon. …Perhaps it is reading too much into this to include the chairman of the board in his life support device into this as well. But according to that hypothesis, I suppose I can draw a line between the chairman and Dragon. At any rate, there is no lack of materials that prove to be quite interesting."

She switched off the recorder.

And switched it back on.

She then repeated the process a few times.

"Details are unknown regarding the several people who made their way into Academy City. Some similarities have been identified with the phenomena witnessed during World War III and in Baggage City. This is also outside of my jurisdiction. I will once again leave this to a different unit that might not even exist as far as I know…"

The woman trailed off with a puzzled look.

She remained silent for a while.

Finally, she sighed and let go of the digital voice recorder.

The small device fell to the ground and she crushed it beneath her pumps. And then she spoke in a voice that she could never let anyone hear.

“Ahh, ahh. This just isn’t Kihara-like at all…”

The Lightning God Thor, Marian Slingeneyer and Mjölnir made their way to Tokyo Bay to sneak aboard one of many rental ships. They were walking through an industrial port. They were not returning by boat; they were using the boat to head to an airport in a nearby country that had poor security.

“So you let her slip through our fingers. Fräulein Kreutune was the final piece needed to manufacture Gungnir. We can’t get anywhere without a holistic esper, remember? What are we going to do now?”

Marian’s words were followed by a clattering noise. The drum-shaped girl(?) was providing meaningless support as usual.

Thor shrugged and said, “We decided on the division of labor from the beginning. I would immobilize Fräulein Kreutune while borrowing power from Mjölnir and you would use your ability to remodel humans to make sure she could not struggle. Then we would just take her out of Academy City. …But there was more of a commotion than we expected. I’m in charge of direct combat and I couldn’t manage it. You two are meant to stay behind the scenes, so you would have just gotten your asses kicked if you had come as reinforcements.”

“Even if you’re the old version, you still hold the name of an almighty. Yet you couldn’t manage it?”

“This is Fräulein Kreutune. And remember, we say almighty, *but it’s only the level of almighty that humans can imagine.* I’m not a Magic God, so don’t expect the kind of almighty that exceeds that,” replied Thor with an offhand tone.

Marian Slingeneyer frowned.

They then heard a slight sound.

Thor was carrying a cooler using a shoulder strap. His arm had struck the rectangular box.

“What is that?”

“Something to put her in a better mood. With this, the spear might still be a possibility.”

Thor started to explain further, but he stopped.

It happened suddenly.

Not him ceasing to speak.

The Magic God Othinus.

A girl who appeared to be around 14 had suddenly appeared in the darkness of the industrial port.

She wore a witch-like hat and one of her eyes was covered by an eyepatch. She wore a mantle over a leather outfit. In this country, her outfit could have been mistaken for a costume. That girl moved her single eye to look at Thor.

Thor and the others grew flustered.

“Should you really be here? This is right in front of the enemy’s base.”

“Distance holds no meaning. What matters is being unseen. More importantly,” said the Magic God Othinus to easily change the subject. “Where is Fräulein Kreutune?”

“Does it look like we succeeded?”

“I ordered you to retrieve Fräulein Kreutune.”

“If you’re gonna do it, just do it,” said Thor disinterestedly as he tossed the cooler towards Othinus.

The impact as it struck the ground forced open the latch holding it shut.

Othinus’s expression did not change. She did not even look inside.

Marian Slingeneyer looked impressed.

“What is this?”

“Academy City’s #2.”

Thor pointed towards a few clear bags inside the cooler. Packed inside were frozen internal organs. “Or rather, his flesh-and-blood parts. I don’t really know if you can call this Kakine Teitoku. But you need a sturdy person, right? Well, he’s sturdier than Fräulein Kreutune in a way. You might be able to reach a holistic esper using him.”

Othinus remained silent.

Marian cut in from the side.

“I thought it had to be someone not dyed by either science or magic?”

“Yeah, it might not work to just modify Kakine himself. But he is a symbol of creation. How about we use him to create a doll from nothing?”

Marian Slingeneyer looked over at Othinus.

Mjölnir could do nothing but mimic Marian.

Othinus finally ended her silence. She said the exact same thing as before.

“I ordered you to retrieve Fräulein Kreutune.”

“Then go get her yourself,” said Thor while casually pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. “But Fräulein Kreutune has already been changed. She has lost what was needed to make the spear. I don’t think capturing her would do any good now.”

“Marian,” said Othinus.

The brown girl assumed she was asking whether that was true or not.

But she was not.

With a dull noise, Thor’s right arm was suddenly severed at the shoulder.

“Gah…?”

The pain came after a short delay.

It was only after Thor’s right arm had fallen to the ground that he let out a scream.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

Magic God's expression did not change. Even a wound as ridiculous as that might not last for long.

She was an existence that could reach anything she wished.

But at the same time, she was an existence that had a 50% chance of failing no matter what she did.

That was who Othinus was and her objective was quite simple.

The elimination of the negative 50%.

With 100% positive possibilities, she could freely wield her power.

And what she needed for that was…

"I now have the final piece. How about we begin manufacturing the spear?"

After Othinus left, Marian Slingeneyer picked up the fallen arm and approached Thor.

"…I'll do it myself."

Thor grabbed the severed arm with his remaining hand that was covered in blood thanks to reflexively holding his wound.

"But…"

"Sorry, but could you leave me alone?" said Thor quietly through clenched teeth. "To be honest, I feel like I'm gonna cry. I don't want to let anyone see that. Dammit, Othinus is the same as ever. She doesn't understand that I risked my life to balance everything out and not return empty-handed."

"You did well."

"But I didn't grant her #1 wish. …Oh, I get it now. I know why I feel like crying. It isn't because of the pain or how pathetic I feel. It's because I was saved. I'm just so happy that I was saved at the last second."

"Don't worry. I would have shit myself had I been in your position."

Marian Slingeneyer snapped her fingers and headed towards the rental ship along with the drum-shaped girl(?).

Once he was sure no one else was around, Thor let out a small sigh.

And he thought quietly to himself.

(…It all went as planned. I've finally managed to sneak in.)

Thor casually spun his own arm around. Looking so carefree he could start humming at any time, he pressed the arm up against his shoulder.

He did not recite any kind of spell.

He did not rely on the power of a talisman or a wonder drug.

But a magical phenomenon did indeed occur. The arm reconnected with a pale light. The fingers of the hand were already opening and closing at his command.

This was obviously not the magic belonging to the Lightning God Thor.

In fact, he was not Thor at all.

(Sneaking in would have been difficult if I had only taken on Thor's form. I needed some powerful card in addition to that. And it couldn't have simply been Fräulein Kreutune. Once she had been shocked to find her expected plan was destroyed, I needed to bring her a replacement idea. It was possible that great shock would prevent Othinus's judgment from working properly.)

However, that alone was not enough to trick the Magic God Othinus.

She was an existence that could make all impossibilities possible.

Even if a normal magician tried to fool her, she had the power to see through it for no discernible reason.

And…

That was why…

It took someone who had taken a step into the territory of a Magic God to fool a Magic God.

The person who had just snuck into Gremlin was Ollerus.

(Now then.)

After perfectly reconnecting his arm, Ollerus purposefully wrapped an old piece of cloth around it.

With his hand still bloody, he headed into the rental ship moored at the industrial port.

(I have snuck in. And I have proven that *someone with as overwhelmingly great power as Fiamma of the Right can freely act within such a collection of powerful people without being detected*. All the preparations are complete.)

Gremlin.

He would determine where Othinus's headquarters were as she hurried to complete the spear.

(It's about time to begin the counterattack. We will be continually fooling each other from right under each other's noses.)

Meanwhile, the real Thor was sitting on a park bench located a short distance beyond Academy City's outer wall.

"Dammit. Both of them are broken. Now I can't even use the zipper on my pants."

He set his wrists by using branches he found on the ground nearby as splints and wrapping cloth around using his mouth. He also had the gunshot wound on his stomach, so he needed to take preparations to use recovery magic. He could not do it with the objects at hand.

But his expression showed no sign of discomfort.

He had no real reason to save Kamijou Touma, but he had no real reason to kill him either. His objective was nothing but obtaining experience points. A stepping stone he had surpassed no longer had any value, but that also meant he no longer felt any persistent desire to destroy it.

Plus…

Things would be different if that boy could grow to be his next stepping stone.

(I guess Ollerus is sneaking into Gremlin using my form right about now. I thought he was crazy when he first brought that deal to me in Academy City.)

Of course, if Thor had refused, Ollerus would likely have simply forced it to happen anyways using brute strength. If that had happened, Thor could be buried six feet under right now.

His reason for going along with the deal was quite simple.

Hawaii and Baggage City.

His love for Gremlin had run out when he saw those disturbances.

(But what am I going to do now?)

Once he had agreed to Ollerus's deal, he ceased to be part of Gremlin. But he was not worried about where he should return to or where he should be headed.

(If I continue like this, Othinus will come to kill me. But if I betray Ollerus, he will probably try to kill me.)

At first glance, both possibilities looked like hell.

After all, both of them were magicians who had reached the territory of a Magic God.

But…

What Thor took into account changed things somewhat.

(Now then, both of those could prove to be truly interesting steps, but which one will I take next?)

The world spread out infinitely.

The options available for him to choose from were too many to count.

Someone had once asked:

“What is your goal? What do you want to gain by having me help you?”

Someone had once replied:

“My goal is to save Fräulein Kreutune. The same as you.”

In a way, that goal had been achieved.

But only that initial goal had been achieved perfectly.

The hero with the power to defeat the demon king was lucky. Everyone would tell him what he should use his power for.

But the Magic God who possessed great power no longer needed a reason to destroy.

And the one who should have been one did not even realize he was straying from what he should be using his power for.

That is the kind of story this is.

The Night After the Festival

With that, it seemed the incident was over.

But the initial question had still not been answered.

“Touma! Who exactly is that girl clinging to your back!?”

It was November. The silver-haired, green-eyed white nun named Index struck a daunting pose in a plaza as a spiky-haired boy sat seiza-style in front of her. If one thought about it rationally, this behavior was going too far since Kamijou was the owner of the dorm room and Index was only a freeloader. But oddly enough, if the circumstances were carefully taken into account, this almost seemed like it was not enough.

And Kamijou Touma responded.

“W-well, her name is Fräulein Kreutune.”

“Why is she clinging to your back?”

“It seems she shrank and became younger due to the effects of eating a replica made by Cendrillon! Some kind of change came over her body structure when she lost her function!”

“Why is she clinging to your back?”

“Possibly because her friends embraced her to prove she had lost the function to eat brains, she gained this strange idea!! Basically, she has a stereotypical habit of embracing people, so it isn’t exclusive to Kamijou-san or anything! She was embracing Misaka before, so this isn’t anything I need to feel guilty about at all!!”

Kamijou frantically pleaded his case because he had a feeling he was going to have his own head bitten into due to a reason having nothing to do with functions. Index growled like a wild dog for a bit, but she finally sighed as if she had given up on something.

“Well, at least I know you haven’t changed, Touma. …And I suppose there is something I should say.”

“What’s that?”

“Welcome home.”

“I’m back, baby.”

Kamijou tried to hide his embarrassment with a joke, and he received a serious bite immediately afterwards.

Afterword

To those who have bought the novels in order one at a time: welcome back. To those who bought them all at once: welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Saints, a Valkyrie, a magic cabal boss, a former human table, the Level 5s from #1 to #4 (and #5 too?), a lightning god, a Magic God, and Fräulein Kreutune. This story had quite the cast of characters, so what did you think? With the main girl in the story, Cendrillon, and the white rhinoceros beetle, this time I had the theme be the limits of what is "human" from both the science and magic sides.

Also, the driving force behind Thor is a similar type to what drove Accelerator when he first appeared. He would have become something like that if he had continued growing without leaving that path.

In a few places, characters that have few lines and don't seem to have many appearances at first are surprisingly deeply involved with certain story threads. If you have time, why don't you try to search those out?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and my editor Miki-san. Not only did this have a lot of battles, but everyone had their own gimmicks. I bet it was an extremely difficult novel for them. I am truly thankful that they stuck with me for this volume, too.

And I give my thanks to the readers. How did you like finally having another story with Academy City as its stage? I hope you stick with me from here on out, too.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

I get the feeling Cendrillon will be easy to use in a lot of different ways.

-Kamachi Kazuma

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